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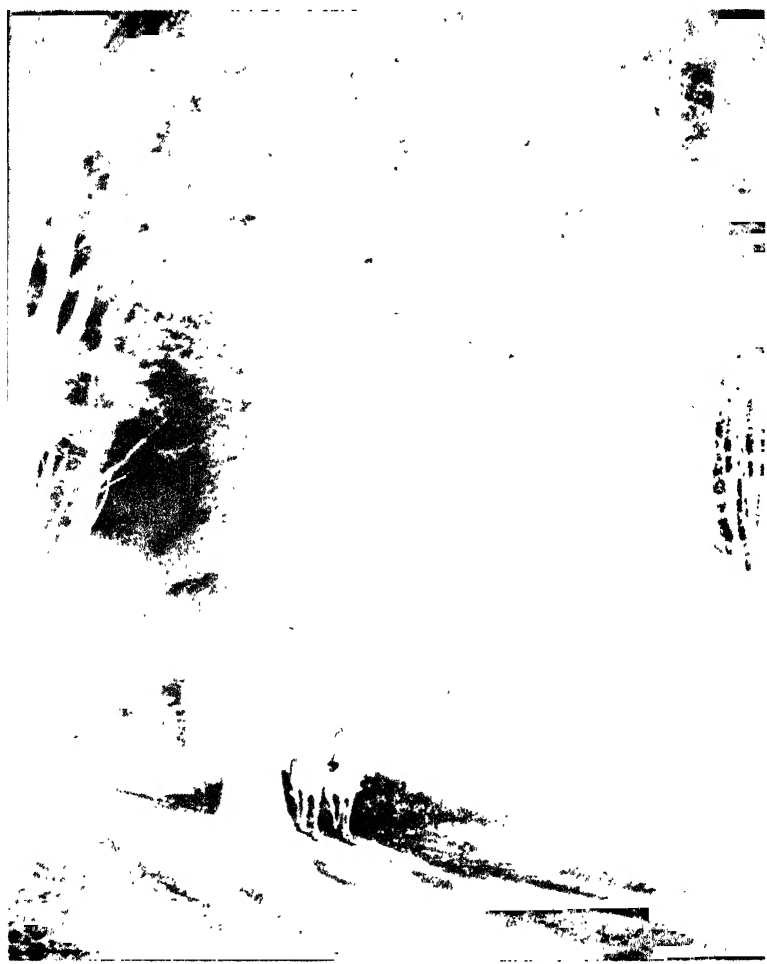


## FILMLAND IN FERMENT









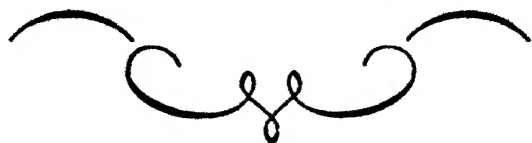
*Frontispiece.*

*Photographed by Fred Daniels (see p. 98.)*

THE ART OF THE STILL-MAN. A SCENE FROM THE  
BRITISH AND DOMINION FILM "THE BLUE DANUBE."

# FILMLAND IN FERMENT

BY  
E. G. COUSINS



WITH A PREFACE BY JACK HULBERT

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## DEDICATION

*On the assumption that every dedicatee must buy at least one copy, Mark Twain once dedicated a book to all the people in the world named Smith. In the same optimistic hope I dedicate this book to the people for whose interest, and in whose interest, it has been written—the Filmgoers of the World.*

E.G.C.



## PREFACE

BY

JACK HULBERT

My only pretext for writing a short preface to this interesting and instructive work of Mr. E. G. Cousins is my prodigious enthusiasm for talking films. If this excuse is valid, anyone coming home from the Tivoli or the Empire on a Saturday night would be immediately eligible for the expression of their views in these pages. But they have not been asked, so I am afraid out of the entire population of the British Isles you will have to put up with me for a few brief moments. Depression need not overwhelm you. There is a way out. A preface has all the convenience of the radio; you can switch off precipitously and get another station. I do this invariably myself, so how can I raise the slightest murmur of protest if you do the same? While applauding loudly most of Mr. Cousins' ideas and opinions, there are just one or two that I am not quite in agreement with, which is just as well for me, otherwise I should have nothing to talk about at all. I could only say "this book is jolly good, read it." Maybe that would have been best, but I have a respect for Mr. Cousins' qualifications as film-journalist, critic, story-writer, playwright and actor. He is a man of vast practical experience and I am happy to be able to endorse the majority of his views. Perhaps a brief account of the studio in London as I see it would



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not be amiss at this juncture. May I be permitted to express a few desultory thoughts on my own film experience?—Yes, certainly—Thanks awfully—begin at once—alright I will.

The revolution that has taken place in the last few years in the entertainment world would have seemed utterly incredible to our grandfathers. It has given birth to an entirely new type of artist and technician. The theatrical profession has emerged triumphant from the turmoil, although many of its members have adapted themselves skilfully to the new mediums. Some of those who have lost their jobs in the old régime have regained them in the new, while others have been left behind. In these restless dynamic times, popular taste is so swayed by innovation that it is possible for the lighter form of entertainment to become old fashioned in the space of a year. As in every business and trade, competition is always increasing. Already the number of entertainment houses is so great that it is difficult to fill them all, and yet fresh ones are being built every year. Consequently the public have a greater selection of amusements to choose from. This summarily disposes of the half-way success and it becomes a question of the survival of the fittest. The silent picture killed melodrama and helped to destroy the music halls, and the radio must render signal service to a large number of listeners. The advent of the talkies is a matter of great importance. It has undoubtedly affected the stage adversely by offering a very strong counter-attraction. The seats are cheaper, in many cases more luxurious, and the suburbanites who formerly patronised the cheaper parts of a West End theatre can now see world stars in their own district. On the other hand men like Jack Buchanan, Ralph Lynn

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and Tom Walls must increase their stage following a hundred fold. Nor will the talkies ever oust the theatre. The live personality is preferable to a series of photographs, and no matter how the technique may improve, the subconscious mind of an audience knows that the artist they are watching can never deviate one iota from his original photographed performance, no matter how warmly his audience may react to his efforts. A mechanical reproduction could never supplant the pleasure of watching the actual person in the flesh. The lure of the stage is too strong to be shaken. With most people it is a matter of price and convenience, and not a case of actual preference. However, the more good films made in this country the better it is for all concerned. Just as the radio has given employment to a multitude of newcomers and rescued a large number of artists from obscurity, so the talkies have provided the public with new names and new personalities.

In view of the recent outstanding successes, the interesting question arises: will British film-producers seize the golden opportunity lying at their feet, and in the near future lead the world? A prime mover in this direction is that energetic and far-seeing young man Mr. M. E. Balcon of Gaumont-British who has already done much to further the cause of England. He has a great ambition which shows every sign of being fulfilled. Are the difficulties insurmountable? It cannot be a question of finance. We can already boast of one of the biggest firms in the world. Our much maligned climate can no longer be blamed for bad photography; the majority of the work is done in the studio even to street scenes and large exteriors. The fallacy of maintaining that the crystal clear atmosphere of California is the

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only possible one for good negatives has perished with the dawn of a new technique. We have the artists and when necessary foreigners can be imported, as in America. We also have the writers and there is a generation of young educated men who are working their way through our studios as ardent apprentices in the various departments.

A great new industry is springing up, pulsating with energy and young blood and giving employment to thousands of people. Our technicians are as good and in some cases better, than those in any other country. Scenic design and décor could never be a stumbling block. What is there that is likely to check our steady progress? Unfortunately a portentous cloud looms on the far horizon, our lack of directors. Such men as Victor Saville, Walter Ford, Alfred Hitchcock, Herbert Wilcox—to name a few, are of outstanding ability, but are there any new men coming along? Can any of our young apprentices be trained? Without doubt every young man who shows distinct signs of talent should be given every opportunity and encouragement to make a successful start. In short our only problem seems to be the finding of more directors. Hollywood was able to do it, so it should not be an impossible task for us.

The importance of a director cannot be too strongly emphasised. Success or failure rests in his hands. He is the man who paints the picture and his mind must work in much the same way as the mind of an old master. He must create a story with a series of pictures that will convey his original conceptions to a discriminating public with unfailing clarity. Undoubtedly the great Hans Holbein and the illustrious William Hogarth could express themselves to-day with the same amount of

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success as in the past, through the modern medium of the camera. In "Marriage à la Mode?" the series of six pictures portraying the tragedy of an unfortunate marriage, Hogarth reflects the foibles of society with such accuracy and force that all who behold cannot fail to understand the meaning he intends to convey. He shows the frailty of human nature on a canvas for every kind of intellect to appreciate. Holbein did the same with his woodcuts illustrating "The Dance of Death". In this picture-sequence Death is seen dogging the footsteps of the Pope, the miser, and the ploughman. There were a myriad of ways of expressing this dramatic idea and Holbein chose the most effective—the simplest, always the hardest to find but undeniably the best. Mr. Noel Coward, the greatest genius in the theatrical profession to-day, expressed himself with the same simplicity in *Cavalcade*. At the end of a love scene, between a honeymoon couple on a liner, in the black-out which followed, the audience read from an illuminated sign *R.M.S. Titanic*. This simple device was more dramatic than an enormous, full-stage Drury Lane production. It conjured up a multitude of mental pictures far more harrowing than any attempt at realism. The scene of the never-ending line of soldiers with the three girls singing in front must have stirred the imagination of the dullest intellect with its stimulating symbolism.

Dürer, the great German painter, showed his tremendous power of imagination in a series of wood engravings illustrating the Apocalypse. The most famous of these, depicting the ravages of war, inspired the well known film *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*. Rembrandt's pleasing way of directing your attention, by means of

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light, to the part of the picture he wants you to dwell on, is the same idea, as emphasising on the screen in a close-up, some significant detail of the story, like a name on a handkerchief, the raising of the eyebrows, or a man's feet travelling through the city. A painter tells his story on canvas and expresses himself in his own individual way. He studies the minutest details of his subject which he faithfully reproduces, or on the other hand merely suggests, expressing an idea rather than rendering appearances, according to his taste. The grouping of his characters and the arrangement of his lighting spring from his own particular feelings and the harmonious whole is a study controlled by one brain. It bears the stamp of the artist. It is essentially an individual effort. It has a certain touch, it is painted in a certain key, and in a certain colour-scheme, realistic and impressionistic, which makes it distinctive. By the same token the creation of a film is essentially an individual effort. It is already made in the mind's eye of the director before he ever goes near the "floor". He has studied his script with infinite care, amending and adjusting the author's work until a final and complete scenario is produced. He then commences painting at no particular given spot, possibly at the end or in the middle, it makes no difference to his vivid mental imagery. He works with live personalities and composes his groups with lighting, interpreting humanity as he alone sees it. The fact that possibly he cannot act himself matters not. His job is to explain carefully what he wants and see that he gets it. The entire responsibility of the picture rests on his shoulders. He has a legion of assistants who design the sets, arrange the crowd scenes, cut and join the various "shot" sequences, and in some cases actually direct in

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his absence, but the harmonious whole which he is gradually developing is entirely under his personal control. The great Flemish Master, Paul Rubens, was such a prolific painter that he established a picture factory at Antwerp and laboured with a large number of collaborators. In one of his pictures the landscape was by Breughel, the accessories by Jan van Kessel and the architecture by Van Delen and Rubens himself painted the figures, but the entire work was controlled by his genius and is virtually the effort of one brain. The picture hangs in the Irish National Gallery at Dublin, entitled "Christ in the House of Martha and Mary". It is quite justifiable to speculate on the possibility of a well-made film becoming a classic and delighting posterity with its reflections of the past. Future generations may enjoy the work of some of the world's master directors. But it would be unfortunate if they suffered the same fate as many great artists of the past have done, like John Constable who was more or less neglected during his lifetime and never became famous till after his death.

In view of the natural scarcity of good film-directors, the obvious plan is to train the young men of promise in the hope of finding a capable personality.

A year in the scenario department and a couple of years in the cutting-room with a certain amount of time spent on the floor watching a picture being "shot" should develop any talent that a potential director might possess. The novelist's sense of story construction must be developed and also the editor's instinct for adjusting, condensing and cutting the various scenes after they have been "shot". Above all the true artist's instinct for painting humanity as he feels it, must be one of the

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chief qualifications. True the camera can only photograph exactly what it sees, but an imaginative brain can utilise an infinite variety of angles and also suggest to the mind's eye a dramatic or comic situation in the way Mr. C. R. W. Nevinson might do it. Finally the successful director must be an adroit diplomat, possessing consummate tact and unlimited patience. Film-artists are very amenable and are easily led and it is their keen and acute sensitiveness that enables them to respond so quickly to an idea.

JACK HULBERT.

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## INTRODUCTION

NOWADAYS almost everyone "goes to the pictures"; yet few people realise what is taking place in the film world, or that events are shaping which are of vital importance to the world in general and to Britons in particular.

It is only to us who dwell within the borders of Film-land that the change is perceptible; and most workers in the studios are too closely concerned with the pressing needs of the present to worry about the future.

However, it is worth our while to glance about and mark the tendencies; and although unfortunately the very conditions under which films are made preclude the possibility of a tour of inspection such as one might make round a motor-factory or distillery, we may perhaps do within the covers of this book what we could in reality never do—make a personally-conducted tour of the film-world, into the studios, the laboratories, out on location, into the lives of players, into the offices and even the brains of film-executives.

Then, I hope, we shall have a better understanding of conditions and tendencies, the possibilities and probabilities governing what I assume to be not only the greatest popular entertainment but one of the greatest national and international forces this present century will know.

*Authors' Club,  
London, S.W.1.*

E. G. COUSINS.



## PART I. THE FILM



## CHAPTER I

### OLYMPUS—FROM THE AIR

A CHANGE is coming in the world of films.

It will not be revolutionary like the coming of talkies, but evolutionary like the development of the good silent pictures to the high standard reached just before they faded from the screens of the world.

However, it will be far more rapid than that, and it is imminent.

Of course, imminence is a relative term which might well have been coined for the convenience of prophets who prefer to "hedge"; but I wish to say explicitly that the wide general sweep of the change will be upon us within the next year or two. The change itself has already begun.

One feature of it is the disappearance of actors from the screen.

What has always been, to the vast majority of people, the most important thing about films? Film-stars.

This is a purely artificial condition, manufactured by the shrewd business men who have governed the film-industry from its earliest days.

Over and above its material needs, Mankind, as far back as we can trace its characteristics, has always demanded three things—a picture to look at, a story to listen to, and a hero to worship.

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If that hero were made sufficiently powerful, sufficiently aloof, and sufficiently mysterious, he would become a god.

Gods are merely promoted heroes; and film-stars are, in effect, gods.

The clever Americans who launched cinematography as a world-force may not have argued in so many words to that effect, but such was the root principle from which they grew their mighty businesses.

First, give the people a hero, whom to adore. Then remove that hero to Olympus, and you have a god . . . and mortals will throw down their last scanty pence in tribute to a god.

That is Human Nature, and if you are on the right side of Human Nature—the side from which the cash-register is worked—you are in a fair way to becoming yourself as a god, knowing profit from loss.

So, in effect, argued the American film-producers who became magnates; but even a magnate is not necessarily a seer, and something has happened to upset their calculations.

The gods whom they created have grown too big for their boots—or their Olympus—and are threatening their creators with destruction.

This is how it came about.

When (in England, about the beginning of the present century) film-producers first took to advertising their films, they began by offering them as pictures to look at, since that was the novelty, the marvel, the attraction over and above that of the magic-lantern. A picture moved before your eyes; it was enough.

Once generally accepted and in danger of palling, the new invention must begin to tell a story. Before the

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War, two authors of the calibre of Dickens and Pinero were telling their stories through the medium of the cinematograph—the former posthumously, the latter experimentally.

This was good; but the producers, with one eye on the theatre, saw a chance of selling their wares to the public on another recommendation—that of their actors; and immediately the mad scramble began which has now led the producers as near to the edge of the precipice as need be—the scramble to make stars.

No hero, since the world began, has ever been exalted as has the film-star.

Great statesmen have steered the Ship of State to safety and prosperity; great soldiers and sailors have delivered their nation from the heel of the oppressor; great artists have made the world more beautiful, great explorers have made it wider, great scientists have made life easier and safer, great preachers have made it seem better worth while.

All these have been rewarded with the polite thanks of the nations; but is there one of them who, in life or after death, could command such fierce devotion, such passionate adoration, such sheer worship as is accorded Greta Garbo?—as Valentino, six years after his death, still receives?

The heroes, elevated on clouds of spurious publicity, are become gods; as mortals they may have been content with sauerkraut, frankfurters, and honest lager beer, but nothing less than nectar and ambrosia will satisfy them now; and these bare necessities of god-life are deucedly expensive.

In prosperous times the high priests who received the offerings of the multitude were glad to pay a grotesque



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ambrosia-allowance of thousands of pounds a week to the better-served divinities. But comes a period of world-depression and economic readjustment, and how does the high-priest—the Laemmle, the Schenck, the Zukor—stand?

He tries to curtail the daily ration of nectar, and gets it in the neck. The gods on the mountain-top must have their due, however badly things are going with the poor devils on the lower slopes.

In less rarefied language, the major stars of Hollywood have taken a concerted stand against any reduction of their salaries; and some, instigated thereto by the powerful agents, are even clamouring for more money. And the great and powerful men who placed them in their seemingly impregnable position are beginning dimly to realise that they are left holding the baby. What they do *not* realise, however, is that the stars were never really necessary at all. That film-acting is, or should be, a contradiction in terms.

They certainly *should* realise it, for the majority of the stars of the silent days were people who could not have held an audience for five minutes if they had appeared on the stage; they were given their fictitious quality as actors by the genius of such men as David Wark Griffith, who, above all others, perceived the histrionic and pictorial potentialities of the film, and used the screen-actors as an appurtenance.

A decade hence they will seem an impertinence.

Griffith gave the world a story to listen to, a picture to look at. The clever publicity men gave it a hero to worship—a Gish, a Barthelmess—when they might more profitably have deified a Griffith.

It was his brain that brought his pictures into being—

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not the brains of his actors. He could have done with any pretty face what he did with Lilian Gish's: with any brawny, good-looking young man what he did with Richard Barthelmess. He could have done it by constructive scenario-writing, constructive photography, constructive cutting; and, but for the activities of the publicity-mongers, no one would have known or cared who the players were—and Hollywood would not be in the "hell of a jam" (her own picturesque phrase) that she is in to-day.

Why have the shrewd producers not observed the way out of this quagmire of inflated salaries and all-powerful stars? For a very good reason—the way out has been pointed by Russia, and Russia is suspect.

Russia, in fact, is in disgrace. She has too recently passed through a period of such terror as we have long since forgiven France. She has tried to spread insidiously through the world a patent medicine whose efficacy she has not yet proved upon her own body. She is, at present, a kind of Ishmael, and no one wants to learn from Ishmael.

Yet, in this matter of films, Russia knows.

After a war and a revolution, she found herself even more crippled financially than most other nations; she literally could not afford to buy film-stock—that is, cinematograph celluloid—with which to produce films.

There was available, however, just sufficient for experimental purposes, and, led by Kuleshov, Pudovkin, and Eisenstein (who will most certainly be deified in the fulness of time) Russian producers spent two richly-profitable years in experiment.

They determined (what they had suspected from the work of D. W. Griffith) that the art of Cinema is a

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creative and not an imitative or recording art; that it is essentially plastic; that it can employ every other art in its scope . . . and that *it can dispense with every other art* if necessary or expedient.

There is my text. Cinema (and I use the word with a capital letter to avoid the repeated use of the clumsy terms "The art of Cinema" or "Cinematography") can stand alone as an art, being itself an art, but served by a combination of sciences.

It has employed actors, because its sponsors had popularised actors, and it is easier to keep on giving the public what it wants than to accustom it to what better things you have to give.

It has employed dancers, and singers, and painters, because it did not know any better.

The Russians, I beg to repeat, know better. You seldom find a professional actor in a Russian film; you find Types. You seldom find a dancer; instead you find constructive cutting—a swift and rhythmic alternation of images—and you think you are watching a dancer. You seldom see the result of any terrible risk run for the sake of securing a film-effect; instead you see the result of those two years of experiment—and the effect is more thrilling than any recorded deed of reckless daring could be.

Constructive scenarism—constructive photography—constructive cutting; the nation that best applies these principles will be allotted the contract of entertaining the world.

It will not be Russia. She doesn't care a billion worthless roubles about entertaining the world. She is out to convert the world to Bolshevism, and all the brilliance of Pudovkin and his disciples are being put into the effort.

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It may be America—but America has always tended to adopt a patronising attitude towards Art. She has always said to the poor artist “Become fashionable, and I’ll give you a commission”. She has never rolled up her sleeves and waded into his atelier to help.

It *should* have been America, for she had two-and-a-half years of peace which the other nations were wasting at war, and she has had money with which to experiment. But, apart from a very few men of the calibre of Lewis Milestone, Ernest Schoedsack, and King Vidor, she has merely gone on improving the processes she has always employed.

I hope it may be England. I fully expect to be snubbed for this by men and women of broad view, who say that Art should know no boundaries; and I agree to that—but neither should language, nor currency, nor commerce, nor education.

At some future date I expect the Universal Brotherhood of Man to be established; but long before that I expect to see one nation placing itself at the head of all the others and leading the way, with Cinema as one of the chief means of progress; and I want my nation to be the one. You “can’t say fairer than that.”

But how it is to be done? Not, certainly, by violent action or reaction. First we must experiment, as Russia experimented, though with a different purpose in view; and to do this we must have money; and to have the money we must capture a large part of the world’s film-market—for I am not one of those who believe that the necessary capital for every national purpose should be found by an additional tax on horse-power or petrol.

In the light of this need, it is of vital interest to see

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how we are equipped for the fray as compared with other nations.

Therefore let us examine our own ground, and reconnoitre the enemy's ground, and establish our claim to Tom Tiddler's ground between; for we must, I fear, wage war with our present archaic weapons while we are learning the use of new ones.

But, as we inspect the battlefield, let us not omit to notice where our future advantage will lie. An accident, such as the financing of some genius by a wealthy patriot for the purpose of conducting experiments, may bring the victory into our hands with something very like revolution. Meanwhile, if we must evolve slowly, let us make sure of doing it in the right direction.

## CHAPTER II

### "FIRST BEGINNING"

STANDING in the clutter and dirt and disorder of a film-studio, with the earnest desire to make the involved process of film-production a little clearer to the layman, I sympathise deeply with the official war historian who is allowed a few hundred pages in which to straighten out the jumbled blunders, splendours, and mess of four tortured years into something intelligible and informative.

There is so much to put in, so much more that must be left out if we are ever to close our portmanteau at all; and as the responsibility of selection lies with me I shall assume that you are a modern filmgoer, with a keen interest in production and little familiarity with its details.

A complete history of film-production has yet to be written, and that is certainly not my purpose; nevertheless, to appreciate our present position it may be as well to glance back at the origins of this amazing industry.

Its internationality was foreshadowed sixty years ago, when a native of Kingston-on-Thames took the world's first motion pictures, on the Pacific Coast—using German lenses.

Edward Muybridge, who was conducting a photographic survey of the coast, made the interesting experiment of ranging twenty-four cameras in line, fixing long

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threads to the shutters, and having these broken in succession by a galloping horse, whose movements were thus recorded on the camera-plates.

This was a momentous beginning; but in the first place Muybridge had no means of exhibiting these photographs except by pinning them in line on a wall; and he would have needed a thousand cameras to make a minute's cinema entertainment as we know it to-day.

In 1885 the roller film for photography was invented by George Eastman, and four years later a Bristol man, William Friese-Greene, photographed a scene in Hyde Park with a moving-picture camera of his own invention.

He is generally regarded, both in America and in England, as the original and true inventor of the moving-picture camera; and it was not until 1893 that Thomas Edison followed with his kinetoscope, a kind of peep-show device not vastly superior to the ancient Zoetrope, or Wheel of Life.

Cinematography may be said to have first stood up on its own very shaky legs in 1896, when the world was startled by seeing moving pictures on a screen seven feet square—projected by a machine invented by Robert W. Paul, of Covent Garden.

The first principles were thus established; and up to the time when talking pictures revolutionised the whole business, practically all progress consisted merely of improvements and extensions of these principles.

The Theatrograph, the Bioscope, and other variants began to make their appearance, and by the beginning of the present century a vaudeville programme was hardly considered complete unless it included "moving pictures"—usually a clumsily-faked representation of

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some current event abroad, or the scratched, flaked, and flickering phantom of a public ceremony at Home.

These early efforts would appear incredibly bad to a generation whose first experience of the cinema occurred ten or fifteen years later; but in those far-off days there were few critics of the new wonder—though few, on the other hand, would have cared to predict the world-dominion which the screen exercises to-day.

Indeed, in 1913 a responsible critic, John Palmer, in his book "*The Future of the Theatre*", delivered himself thus:

"The picture palace has tapped a vast public looking for cheap amusement. It threatens to slay utterly the travelling show, nigger minstrels, the panorama and the circus. It has won a permanent place for itself as an item of vaudeville. But we shall in a few years hear little of its competition with the theatre. Nor will those stuffy and stupefying picture palaces be able for long to maintain themselves in their hundred thousands. The limitations of this form of entertainment, already eked out in the larger palaces with music-hall varieties, will soon appear; and the interest even of the threepenny public be exhausted."

A vividly-remembered childhood experience of my own may serve to indicate the gap that has been bridged in thirty years or so.

In the summer of 1900 I was brought Home from North China, where our whole family had been refugees from the Boxer rebellion. Having settled in Bedford, we were one day excited by the notice that "*Marvellous,*



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True, and Authentic Moving Pictures" of the bombardment of the Taku forts by Allied warships were to be shown in a local public hall.

As we had been present at the actual bombardment, it was adjudged suitable that this should be the first motion-picture that I should see, and I was accordingly taken.

Sitting in the dark on a cane-seated chair I had a vivid mental picture of the real affair; the low, flat line of the mud forts a mile or so inland; the British and Japanese gunboats out in the harbour, the screaming of an occasional shell overhead, and the tiny white puff and cloud of black dust that marked its destination. We waited, eagerly, for this experience to be miraculously reborn.

I am convinced, looking back, that without the title which was considerably displayed we should have had no idea that it was the bombardment of the Taku forts we were witnessing. A model of a European mediaeval fortress, with towers at each corner reminiscent of the Tower Bridge, stood in a small lake, and round it swam several toy clockwork launches of a type and size then popular at 3/7 each (I owned one myself). Now and then a tiny puff of smoke would issue from the side of one of these vessels, and the top of a tower, as though by mutual agreement, would splash down into the water.

When the lights went up my mother, brother, and I sat gazing at each other in bewilderment, while the rest of the audience roared, clapped, and stamped its approval of the masterpiece.

"Was *that* it?" said my mother, dazed. . . .

This was followed by an equally "authentic" film of the fighting in South Africa; in a typically English corner

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of parkland, one helmeted and accoutred British scout after another walked incautiously up a grassy slope, only to be shot or clubbed by a handful of Boers in slouch hats and black synthetic beards, who popped over the crest like jack-in-the-box.

At last a force of British troops, which could hardly have been a man under eight strong, stormed the position at the point of the bayonet amid the fervent patriotic cheers of the audience; and when the gas jets in the hall were turned up they shone on faces transfigured by a great and glorifying experience.

"One of those soldiers was killed twice," complained my brother, aged twelve. "I knew him by his short legs."

But the achievement was there; an audience had been persuaded to pay money to sit and watch these absurdities, had been bamboozled into accepting them seriously and even enthusiastically, and had been sent away vowing to return. The great figures of the film world, the Laemmles, the Foxes, the Schencks, and the Goldwyns, have, after all, achieved little more than this; only they have done it on a grander scale, and profited vastly thereby.

Curiously enough, one of the few premonitions I have ever experienced came to me in connection with films—and this was twenty years ago.

Having a couple of hours to put in between trains in Liverpool, I wandered into the Palais de Luxe, the first continuous "picture palace" to be opened in that city, and saw a complete programme of story, comic, and topical films, accompanied by a tiny and tinny orchestra; and I distinctly remember being struck by the possibilities of this new element in life—this enter-

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tainment that cost only a few pence, into which one could wander at any time of the day to stay as long as one liked, and which brought the whole world entrancingly before one's eyes as one sat at ease in a red plush tip-up chair like a half-guinea stall.

This, I felt overwhelmingly, will sweep the world.

Even at that time I realised the most attractive quality of the new entertainment—cheapness. It was as though one were being offered a clear first carbon copy of Life at a fraction of the price of the original; and it sufficed.

It was the strange fashion, up to and including the war years, to allude to cinematography as being "in its infancy"—a phrase which was particularly irritating to men who had spent twenty years or so in fostering its growth; but it is a truism that one's development is seldom observed by one's own family; it is only when a family portrait-album is unearthed that the startling change is apparent.

Similarly, if we glance at the films of even ten or a dozen years ago we are amazed at the standard of entertainment with which we were then satisfied. The humour appears crude and gross, the acting absurdly stiff and stilted, the settings unnatural and unconvincing to a degree; while if we go back to the product of the years before the War we shall find the difference most ludicrous.

To appreciate this fully one has only to attend one of the Film Society's shows, where ancient masterpieces are resurrected for their archæological interest, and compared with the very latest emanations from post-impressionist Russia or *surrealiste* France. These veterans are far funnier than any intentional comedy; imagine, for instance, the original version of *Ben-Hur*,

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the first fore-runner of that screen landmark which Fred Niblo directed and which ran for forty-nine consecutive weeks at the Tivoli in London.

The "highlights" of this triumphant later version were the sea-battle and the chariot-race; these were shattering, dynamic—the highest expression of realism and drama then conceived; in the earlier film we see the hero condemned to the galleys; he is led away in chains—but do we ever glimpse the sea? Not so. He marches back safe and sound, having spent years chained to an oar, survived a mighty naval battle, been cast away on a raft, and changed into dry clothes.

Similarly with the chariot-race. A herald announces the race, Ben-Hur departs to compete in it—and almost immediately re-enters, immaculate, having won it!

Such instances of the tax imposed upon our imagination by these early efforts could be multiplied almost indefinitely; but we need no further proof of the fact that the cinematograph has passed from its infancy, or that the gap separating those early days of the American Biograph Company and the Hepworth Company from the amazing value of "sixpennorth o' pickshers" to-day is as vast as that separating "the infant, mewling and puking in its nurse's arms" from "the soldier, full of strange oaths" which have somehow managed to scrape past the Censor. For weal or woe, film-production has grown up and taken a place in the life of the Nations.

*A place—not yet its rightful place.*

## CHAPTER III

### DAVID AND GOLIATH

THE balance of film-producing importance has swayed curiously in favour of two nations; now Britain and now Hollywood.

Other countries have in turn presented their claim, but the only one ever to throw down a serious challenge to Hollywood's supremacy is Britain, and that within the last year; and the manner in which this has come about makes one of the most romantic stories in the history of commerce.

In the embryonic film days of a quarter of a century ago, when production was in the hands of small private companies or individuals, there were no handicaps; everyone started scratch, and anyone who could command a capital of twenty pounds could embark on film-production with a reasonable chance of at least getting his money back.

Studios were an effete luxury; it was just as well to have some sort of shelter handy in case of rain, but a clump of trees would do very well; and at a pinch the camera, director, and players alike would remain swathed in macintosh sheeting until the skies cleared.

Exteriors, of course, were "shot" absolutely *au naturel*; there was no question in those days of assisting the sun by means of a few thousand-candle-power lamps, or even a reflector by which the sun's rays might be

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thrown on to the subject, such as is used to-day. The scene was prepared, and everyone waited anxiously for the sun to appear, when acting would start feverishly so that a whole scene might be recorded before a passing cloud called an untimely halt.

"Interior" scenes were hardly more elaborate. A wooden dais four or five inches high and a few feet square would be built in the open air, in as secluded a spot as possible, to avoid disturbance by sightseers who were apt to straggle into the picture.

Behind the dais or on two sides of it were erected scenic "flats" similar to those in use on a theatre stage; and on this primitive "set" were mute, inglorious single-reel works of art and commerce produced. I can find no evidence that these were described as "epics", but am quite willing to believe that they were.

Queer effects sometimes crept into films made under such conditions; I know one old actor who remembers the time when, in a death-bed scene, he had to hold the bedclothes with his toes to prevent their being blown away, while the youth who combined the offices of assistant director, assistant cameraman, cashier, secretary, "props", and make-up man waved his arms violently to dissuade a herd of cows, whose favourite grazing-patch was being invaded, from straying into camera-range.

I myself remember once seeing in a "horse-opera", or Wild West film, the interior of a house with its doors and windows barricaded against Indians, in which the cloth was almost blown off the table by a breeze; and in the same film, when the heroine was escaping through a window from the villain, there appeared in the glass of the sash just above her head a perfect image of a movie-

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camera with a shirt-sleeved cameraman cranking away diligently. . . .

These were the days when a film-actor received five shillings a day for his services, and a film-actress, being but a woman, was paid at a slightly lower rate; I wonder what a starry-eyed heroine of those pioneer days would have said to Constance Bennett's reputed £6,000-a-week contract with Warner Brothers to-day!

While production remained in this embryonic state, Britain and America were on level terms; but gradually sets became more and more elaborate, studios became a necessity instead of a luxury, the older order was reversed and "exteriors" as well as interiors began to be shot in the seclusion of the studio; and elaborate and expensive new machinery, such as mercury-vapour lighting (which had the effect of eliminating undesirable shadows) was installed.

All this activity attracted the attention of a band of small but determined financiers in America, who foresaw in the development of this new thing not merely a comfortable living, but a fortune.

Of these seers, one of the first was "Uncle" Carl Laemmle, who is now Chairman of the Universal Company of America; others were Sam Goldwyn, William Schenck, and William Fox. We had on this side of the Atlantic no such visionary, or none with the acumen to "cash-in" on their dreams; and gradually Hollywood, whose sunlight, brilliant atmosphere, and natural scenic resources had made it a production-centre, drew ahead, feeding with thousands of dollars the great new machine which, it found, could be relied upon to give back millions of dollars in return.

By 1914 film-production in England had lost so much

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ground that it only needed a war to drive it down to zero; and the four war-years did that so effectively that when the Armistice was signed there was hardly enough British Film Industry left to shake a crutch at. The victory of Californian brains (which were the assembled brains of the world), dollars, energy, faith, and a certain amount of good luck, was complete.

The first sign of renaissance in England was observed when a shrewd producer named Ernest Gordon Craig (no relation to Ellen Terry's son) saw a chance of profiting by the wave of enthusiasm which follows an apparent victory, and secured the ready co-operation of the War Office and the Admiralty in producing a series of war-films, including *Mons, Zeebrugge*, and *The Battles of Coronel and Falkland*.

These pictures, which met with a great measure of success, conveyed the idea that Britain had some share in winning the War; so America, to correct this impression, immediately counter-blasted with a series of films devoted entirely to the exploits of "doughboys" in love and war, of which the most successful and banal was *The Big Parade*.

It is to the abiding credit of American perspicacity that the United States Government perceived (a) the enormous advertising power of such war-films, and (b) that such advertisement could be better propagated by being wrapped in a sugar-coating of love-interest. The British Government, in its wisdom and dignity, stipulated that there should be no "love-stuff" in any film produced with its connivance; and although this attitude has been subsequently somewhat relaxed, it perceptibly increased the American lead.

Indeed, so successful was the inclusion of the sex



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element that it has since been omitted from hardly a single film of note, however grim its subject. Even in the Hollywood-made *All Quiet on the Western Front*, one of the few films which have ever deserved the much abused label "epic", and of which I shall have more to say in a later chapter, undue prominence is given to the minor incident in which the three German soldiers swim a river at night to visit three French peasant girls.

However, those early British war-films (which earned a knighthood for their sponsor, Gordon Craig) served the useful purpose of keeping British production alive and attracting attention to its possibilities; unfortunately too much attention was attracted, and a number of mushroom companies sprang up, whose glowing prospectuses masked an abysmal incompetence and ignorance of film-production and market requirements.

The public rushed to invest, studios were built, rebuilt, equipped, and re-equipped, production-units were sent abroad on location, thousands of small investors' savings were spent with hardly a hope of return, and, just as the public were beginning to wonder, the Press to ask awkward questions, and board-meetings to become more and more acrimonious, came the bomb-shell from Hollywood—the Talkies!

The new invention had immediate and startling repercussions on both sides of the Atlantic. It stampeded the whole industry into following suit; it saved the Warner Brothers, who threw the bomb, from a tight financial place—entirely according to plan; it put the clock of film-production back twenty years; it caused exhibitors (i.e., owners and managers of cinemas) to unite in reviewing their position, since they found themselves so entirely at the mercy of producers that they could be virtually

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forced to spend, collectively, many thousands of pounds in wiring their theatres for sound films; it afforded the British mushroom companies a convenient excuse for crashing, since shareholders could scarcely blame them for the slump in silent films; and, strange to say, it provided a basis for a new British Film Industry, which has been laboriously built up to its present not inconsiderable importance.

At the time of the change-over, Alfred Hitchcock, then unquestionably Britain's leading film director, was preparing his script for a film called *Blackmail*, based on Charles Bennett's stage play of that name, for British International Pictures Ltd., of Elstree, one of the few production companies then enjoying a firm financial standing.

A hasty conference was held, the script was altered, sound apparatus was improvised, and with cameras grotesquely muffled to deaden the whirr of the shutter, and microphones tied up with string, the first British talkie was born—and was followed a week or two later by a Gaumont talkie (derived from another stage play) *High Treason*, directed at Shepherd's Bush by Maurice Elvey.

These films were both highly successful, and if our producers had continued to grope for a talkie technique which would take them by degrees farther from the stage-play model, we should be much more advanced along the road to first-quality films than we are to-day.

Unfortunately the favourite game of film-producers has always been follow-my-leader, and the first full-length talkie (*The Singing Fool*) having been a "singie", a spate of "singies" occurred. The slogan "All Singing, All Dancing" appeared on the front of every "wired"

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cinema (that is, every one equipped with sound-reproducing apparatus) in the world; long before microphones were ready for such assault and battery they were violently assailed by a heterogeneous cacophony which it was their duty to convey to our suffering ears; and drastically indeed was that duty performed.

Followed a long period of fluctuation, of adjustment, of orientation; little by little it was realised in Hollywood that the trained and modulated English stage voice rubbed the microphone the right way; British players were imported to Hollywood at high salaries and—more satisfactorily from our British point of view—Hollywood film magnates began to consider the advisability of making their films in England.

In this they were influenced by the British Quota Act, which provides that a certain increasing proportion of films shown in our cinemas shall be “home-grown”.

One by one the leading American companies have established British production-units to produce British films, using in some cases, a proportion of American capital, and employing a certain agreed number of foreign technicians, but British players, British studio resources, and British locations; and although the financial position in their own country has led to several of them abandoning production here and having their quota films made instead by British companies, their example has increased our efficiency and has done much towards the consummation, devoutly to be wished, of our studios reaching level terms with Hollywood.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE KINIST

THERE is something of the god in him who has power to sway the multitudes—and the multitude has shown itself more apt to be swayed by films than by music, oratory, or sport.

The triumvirate who make the film—the scenarist, the director, and the cutter—wield a sceptre whose power they too seldom realise; and if these three offices be combined in one man, as I contend they should be, he is indeed a sort of god, as the playwright, the poet, the painter, and the preacher are gods.

To envisage this god clearly, let us consider for a moment the processes of film-production, taking a wide and general survey.

The producer. . . . Do we all understand what a producer is? He used to be the person directly responsible for the making of the film on the floor, a position corresponding to that of the producer in the theatre. But now that functionary in the studio is called the director, and the producer is now the man responsible for the whole film, from inception to completion. The term is so vague nowadays, however, that I shall use it to describe anyone who, at the moment, represents in the studio the producing company, as distinct from the director who works for the company.

The producer, then, has a story (novel, play, short

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story, original story—the procedure is much the same) which he wishes to have made into a film.

He hands the story to his scenarist, and the latter makes a screen-story of it—breaking it into the myriad tiny scenes which the conditions of production necessitate (or should it be “allow”? That question will probably never be satisfactorily answered).

The director then shoots these scenes approximately as laid down in the script, but in any order that seems best—finishing as far as possible with one set before proceeding with another, and so on.

When all the scenes are “shot”, the cutter then takes his turn—selecting and rejecting from the large surplus amount of exposed footage, and arranging the short lengths into their final order, in which they are joined together with a special cement before being handed back to the producer.

Thus we have three people handling the story between its leaving the producer’s hands and its returning to them. (Of course, he actually comes poking round to see what is happening during production, but that is not his job, and he is a nuisance. The householder who buys a watchdog and then barks for himself does so to the detriment of his dog, the neglect of his own job, and the deterioration of his throat-muscles. If he cannot afford or select a dog that can bark satisfactorily, he is not a proper person to own a dog.)

Assuming, however, that the producer has enough “savvy” to let his appointed experts do their work unhampered, there are still three main people working on his film—the scenarist, the director, and the editor, or cutter.

Each of these has his own individual idea of how the

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story should be treated. The scenarist begins, let us say, by treating the original author cavalierly, be he Shakespeare or Snooks (neither of whom is in a position to protest as, for instance, Shaw could and would). The director departs considerably and continually from the scenario in order to interpolate something he has thought of on the set. The cutter may give an entirely new aspect to the story by his rearrangement of scenes. It is notorious that a whole plot may be altered by skilful "cutting" (which includes arranging and joining) even when the original story is well-defined and has been straightforwardly photographed.

There are also comparatively minor functionaries such as the cameraman, the art-director, the musical director, the dialogist, the dress-designer, any one of whom may alter the film according to his strength and unscrupulosity, though not so easily or completely.

Now this is obviously a bad system, since there are three people of equal importance working under one man who can only make confusion worse confounded by interfering. In other words, the producer stands helplessly by and watches his film drift through one dangerous strait after another, any one of which may wreck it through departure from the original course.

But, you very pertinently object, why cannot the director co-operate on the floor with the scenarist, as stage producer and playwright confer during rehearsals?

The answer is in the widely different conditions. The overhead costs in a studio are so terrific that it is impracticable to spend valuable time discussing proposed departures from the script. Very few companies could afford it—and even they could not afford it for long.

With costs so high, the director must obviously be the

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only man on the floor to give directions; he should have full powers and full responsibility. His link with scenarist and cutter during actual production is thus automatically removed, and we find him in a state of splendid isolation, in which he may play ducks and drakes with his scenario in order to achieve effects which will probably be totally misapprehended and misrepresented by the cutter.

The director may know what the scenarist has in mind, but he is also conscious that he himself has had many years' experience as a director (and possibly also as a scenarist), and "knows his stuff"; and if he can improve on the scenario, so much the better, he thinks; while the cutter, in his turn, realises the potentialities of his craft and introduces "constructive cutting" which provides effects that are very graphic but widely removed from the director's intention.

The solution is obvious. The scenarist, the director, and the cutter must be, and undoubtedly will be in the course of time, one and the same person; and he must be given an absolutely free hand within certain well-defined limits—a time-limit, and a money-limit.

In passing, I hear a squeal from the ranks of the Precious "But do you expect an artist to take count of time and money?" Certainly I do—or go without his canvas and his paints. The art of Life is religion, and the key to religion is discipline; even a Gauguin must have discipline of a sort, be it only a ruthless self-abnegation.

I know of three or four British directors who are also expert scenarists and cutters. One or two are actually allowed to write their scenarios, direct, and cut their own film, but with such inexpert interference from the producer (embodied in the production-manager, the

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studio-manager, the chairman, the managing director, and one or two influential shareholders) as to be reduced to the same value as the inarticulated trio functioning in other studios.

In the theatre, the guiding hand is single and supreme. The scenario-writer-element is eliminated, since the material comes fully prepared from the hands of the playwright (I am assuming a competent playwright); and there is no cutter to alter the final form in which the producer presents the author's work to the public.

There is a business-manager, certainly, and a stage-manager (now grandiloquently called a stage-director) and an assistant stage-manager (now sometimes pretentiously termed stage-manager), but these are the producer's allies and co-operators, not his opponents. The centuries of financial struggle through which the Theatre has passed have bred a race of producers who instinctively work with one eye on the exchequer, and are thus on excellent terms with the business-manager; and it is the pride of the stage-manager and his assistant to serve the producer, not to shove their oar in where it will make the biggest splash. The same applies to the scenic artist, costume designer, musical director, chief electrician, and everyone else connected with the production.

I blame injudicious publicity chiefly for the each-for-himself attitude existent in the film-world. In the world of the theatre it is still assumed that good wine needs no (or at most a very small) bush. In Film-land the publicity is the thing; the loudest shrieker makes the most money, and this state of affairs is so infectious as to have instituted, in recent years, a desperate scramble for publicity, in which directors, prop-men, exhibitors, make-up men, dress-designers, musical directors, and



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even publicity-managers (who are supposed to be the last people to draw attention to themselves) have joined in a higgledy-piggledy *mêlée*, some trying to preserve a semblance of dignity about it, others not giving a damn for appearances so long as they secure their share of the limelight.

To gain individual publicity, their work must stick out somewhere, anywhere, wherever it can elude the watchful eye of the man who is trying to keep the production level and even. In fact, film-production as it stands at present reminds me irresistibly of the lady novelist's allusion to her hero in the Oxford and Cambridge boat race—"All rowed fast, but none so fast as Harold."

This jostling for publicity is actually placed on an official footing—*vide* the long, tedious credit titles that precede every film, the wearisome lists of everyone connected with the production. In the Theatre the minor functionaries do not obtrude themselves on our notice; but the name of the Deputy-Assistant-Acting-Vice-Wardrobe-master in a film-studio must be rammed down our throats because his contract provides for it, and what do our poor throats matter?

No one grudges the theatrical producer his meed of publicity, and no one envies him his load of responsibility. However, he has the satisfaction of knowing that it is by his own work that he stands or falls—not by that of his colleagues.

I have heard *ad nauseam* after many a monumental "flop", from the scenarist "Couldn't recognise my own work on the screen, old boy": from the director "There's no use attempting to conceal the fact, old boy, the film was cut to hell": from the cutter "If I'd had a few

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logical sequences I might have saved it, old boy, but we can't make bricks without straw."

And the tragedy lies in the fact that they all believe they are right—and probably are! But it doesn't help the next film to be any better—and it very seldom is any better.

No art has ever advanced so rapidly in potentiality and remained so static in achievement as the Art of Cinema; and this unintegration (for you cannot *dis*-integrate what has never been an integer) is largely responsible for the lack of true progress. A man will never learn from his mistakes if he can shift the blame on to his colleagues; and while a so-called production-unit is merely a series of overlapping departments, it is almost impossible to trace the fault.

But the first necessity is to trace the fault, and having discovered it to be irrationality we must proceed to rationalise.

I contend that the most important single reform is the institution of single control.

Naturally film-production must be departmentalised. There must be a department of production, a department of administration, a department of publicity, a department of engineering, and so on. But I would furnish the Managing Director, or General Manager, with departmental heads who knew their job, and advise him to let them get on with it.

In the department of production, I would have one man entirely responsible for each film from the story stage to the edited picture; but I would not call him Producer, for the label belongs by right of tradition to a different functionary in the Theatre, and I am a respecter of traditional rights.

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I should call him the Kinist. ("Cinist" sounds, as most people would pronounce it, altogether too sinister.)

The Kinist, then, would—and *will*, or you may call me a false prophet—take custody of the story as selected by a committee, of which he will be a member.

He will bear in mind that the story, under the new and improved conditions which will then be governing film-production, will *not* have been chosen because, as a play or a novel, it has enjoyed considerable publicity; or because M.-G.-M. or Paramount has just made a successful film on a similar theme; or because there is a wonderful part for a girl whom the studio has on contract—for, as I hope to show, the day of both long contracts and wonderful parts for girls will be over.

Our Kinist will realise that the story has been selected solely because it is capable of remaining a good story when transferred to the screen—as, for the matter of that, almost any story will then be; and his first and last care will be to ensure that the story "gets over".

He will not be sidetracked by any considerations of having to build up a part for Miss Tottie Tiptoes, or of having to impose a happy ending because Mr. Al Burzt, the chairman of the company, thinks it would be "better box-office". He will have no more distractions than the sculptor working on a statue.

The Kinist is a man who thinks in pictures—in terms of motion-photography; every stage of the story will suggest to him its most advantageous method of scenario treatment.

As a playwright divides his story into acts and scenes, to its better presentment, not its distortion, so will the Kinist.

His scenario complete, it will not be rushed into pro-

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duction, for studio economy will have reached a point of efficiency at present undreamed; a sufficient period will be allowed for the necessary administrative work before the production takes the floor. A schedule, as detailed and defined as that governing the running of a railway system, will be drawn up—and *adhered to*; and lest any reader who is acquainted with the manifold difficulties and delays attending studio production be tempted here to shut the book with an impatient slam, let me hasten to say that I will make good that italicised phrase in a later chapter.

The most minute details of set-construction, of the calling of players (from "leads" down to "extras"), of costume and photography and lighting, of transport and lodging and rationing when "on location" will be arranged—all, be it understood, by the heads of the various departments in such conference as is necessary, but all under the direct control of the Kinist.

This period of gestation, which will necessarily vary with the length of the film, the amount of location-work, and other variable factors, will not occasion a moment's delay in production, for studio organisation will have reached such a degree that when one production is in the preparatory stage another will be on the floor and a third in the cutting-room, each under its own Kinist.

This is merely another way of saying that the studios will be organised, which at present they are not.

Taking the floor, the production will follow meticulously the schedule which has been laid down for it. Any flashes of inspiration which may come to the Kinist in the course of production (and which, if coldly dissected, will often prove to be merely tangential departures quite irrelevant to the story) will be sternly sup-

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pressed by him—or pigeon-holed in his orderly mind for use in a later film.

The time for inspiration is during construction of his scenario, and (to a limited degree and only for the moment) while cutting his film.

I distrust the word "cutting" as thus applied, for words have a strong psychological influence, and the cutter is inclined to slash. On the other hand, the word "editor" suggests by its literary association one who selects and discards from the work of others, whereas the Kinist, when he comes to the cutting-room, will select and discard from his own work.

But there will certainly not be the chaos which now exists, for to-day a fresh mind approaches the story—as expressed in terms of numbered and lettered strips of celluloid—from an entirely new viewpoint, and proceeds to cut constructively, to create what was never intended to be created, and to reject summarily what it has taken vast expenditure of time, money, and brains to build up.

We shall no longer be treated to the anomalous spectacle of a cutter demanding the "shooting" of new scenes because he has discarded the original ones. The Kinist will do his cutting, his editing, his arranging of sequences on paper—*first*.

That will be the purpose of his scenario—not merely to be used as a kind of rough guide to production.

Thus the editing will resolve itself into a selection between two or more "takes" of each scene—and possibly, in the case of cross-cutting for a specific purpose such as the expression of panic, the exact length (already more or less exactly prescribed in the scenario) of each shot; and the more skilled the Kinist, and the

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more expertly he can think in terms of his final picture while preparing his scenario, the less determination of length and order will be required in the cutting-room.

Ultimately and ideally, the Kinist will not enter the cutting-room at all. His duties will end in the projection-room, when he sees the various "takes" and selects one of each for inclusion in the final film—not merely on account of its photographic qualities, but with a view to its value as a unit of construction.

All that the cutting-room staff need then do is to join up, in the exact length and the exact order prescribed in the scenario, the lengths of film selected by the Kinist from his alternative "takes". Each length is numbered at its beginning and end, by the simple device of having a numbered board held in front of the camera at the beginning and end of each "take".

Skilled operatives will be necessary in the cutting-room, certainly—but no more "artistic" than those employed in an electric-lamp factory.

Once his scenario is complete, it should be quite inelastic, for two reasons. Firstly, because the clutter and clatter of a film-studio make constructive thinking extremely difficult; secondly, because immeasurably the most expensive part of film-production, and hence the part in which it is most essential to stick closely to schedule, is the actual process of photographing the action; thirdly, because the order in which the scenes are shot (determined in production-conference with an eye solely to economy and expedience) is necessarily so jumbled as to make it a matter of great difficulty to re-co-ordinate them; and fourthly because it is impossible for scenes to be inserted without upsetting the finely-adjusted balance of the scenario—since no Kinist (super-

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man though he be) would undertake the elaborate and entire regrouping necessary in the nest for the sake of accommodating a single cuckoo.

The Kinist will undoubtedly arrive—but whence?

I know he is at present in the studios. I believe he is securing his experience in the school of hard knocks. I *hope*—devoutly—that these remarks may encourage him to persevere, for we have need of him, and shall have need of dozens of his kind.

I have it in my mind that our first full-fledged and recognised Kinist will be Alfred Hitchcock; and other potential ones are George Pearson, Walter Forde, Hayes Hunter, Maurice Elvey, Sinclair Hill, Victor Saville, and Alexander Korda, because they have four very essential qualities—the ability, born of experience, to think in pictures, a forceful personality, independence of mind, and a certain ruthlessness which will be invaluable on the floor—as I shall presently show.

There are other men—and women—working under expert supervision in our studios (as for instance the new directors of B.I.P.'s quota pictures for M.-G.-M. under Alfred Hitchcock) who will doubtless blossom out as Kinists, but their burgeoning will depend on Evolution, Natural Selection, and the Survival of the Fittest; and the sooner these unerring selectors produce the right men and women, the sooner will British film-production come into its own.

## CHAPTER V

### THE TRIUMPHANT TRICKSTER

ONCE (and what a long time ago it seems!) "trick" films figured in every programme with great success. The French producers were particularly fond of them.

They were made on two main principles—substitution and varying celerity. In the first case, the camera was stopped and the lens covered at a critical point in the action, and a substitution was made before the camera started again.

For instance, supposing a very fat man were to fall on a dog. The camera would stop just as the man fell, and a deflated rubber dog would be substituted for the live one. The camera would begin to photograph the man again as he raised himself from the flattened victim, a little boy would come running up with a bicycle-pump and inflate the rubber dog—and just as it reached full size the camera would stop while the real dog was substituted, and continue again as it ran away, alive and well.

Marvellous!

But after a while the wonder grew less, for everyone began to understand more or less how it was done.

The same applies to the more obvious "reversed action" films (in which a man who had dived off a bridge into a river would dive gracefully back on to the bridge, feet first), and the "slow-motion" and "rapid-motion".



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films (achieved by turning the camera respectively faster and slower, and projecting either at the normal speed), the former of which survives to-day in instructional pictures of athletic feats.

But producers made the grand mistake of overlooking the fact that the principle of trick photography, trick direction, and trick cutting which had been exploited for the sake of amusement, could be put to more serious use. They have taken nearly twenty years to realise that trickery (or craftsmanship) can achieve *any* effect; literally *any* effect.

I can see no limit to the potentialities of Cinema, once this principle is accepted. Unreality can be made real; reality can be rendered grotesque; impossible juxtapositions can be effected; Time and Space can be annihilated; and, most valuable of all perhaps, emphasis can be laid exactly where it is desired.

Pudovkin, in his book on film technique (a collection of most enlightening essays, expounding much that the Russian cutters have learned and developed from the work of the American David Wark Griffith) postulates the existence of "filmic time" and "filmic space"—that is, the creation of a new reality from a selection of parts of our existent reality.

This, in the speech which you and I would use to each other over lunch, simply means that important parts of an actual incident or scene are photographed and joined together to emphasise the *effect* of the incident or the *character* of the scene.

We employ this principle of selection every day of our lives.

Supposing I were describing to my family an incident I had witnessed on the Underground, would I say that

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the youth who slipped and nearly fell between train and platform was wearing a brown tie, or that I had heard him book to Parson's Green, or that the time was exactly five-forty-seven? No. I should describe only the most dramatic bits—his wildly-waving arms, his terrified scream, the horror in his face, the loud crack of his broken walking-stick, the obvious strength of the man who rushed forward and caught him, the latter's embarrassment when thanked.

I might, if I were skilful, thus make the incident sound more exciting than it really was—*by selecting only the exciting parts*; and this is precisely what the skilful cutter does.

Pudovkin instances the presentation of a street accident in the Jacky Coogan film *Daddy*. Very short though varying lengths of film were shown, in the following order, of (1) the traffic, and a pedestrian stepping among it (2) the chauffeur's startled face as he applies the brake (3) the victim's face, screaming (4) taken from the chauffeur's seat, legs near the revolving wheels (5) the wheels braked and skidding (6) the corpse.

If you have a chance, see the Corinne Griffith picture *Lily Christine*. This is a good film gone wrong in the making, but one of the scenes as originally planned, the street accident (or suicide—it is not clear which) has been retained and is extremely effective.

The selection is similar to that described above, but Paul Stein (the director—presumably responsible) goes a step further by leaving to the imagination of the audience the actual corpse. The faces of the lorry-driver and his mate, the startled screams of the bystanders, the squeal of brakes, the jostling crowd that rushes to the spot, the two policemen's helmets bobbing up and down

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in the crowd—our imagination seizes avidly upon these details and paints in our mind a picture more vivid and terrifying than could well be put on the screen.

In Cecil B. DeMille's *Dynamite* even more blanks are left for the audience to fill in, for the little boy runs from the shop, warning voices are heard and the squeal of brakes, and only by the faces of the witnesses inside the shop do we know what has happened outside until the child is carried in.

This appeal to our imagination is one of the strongest cards in the hand of the film-producer.

It was once the subject of an interesting experiment by Pudovkin and his colleague Kuleshov. They took a continuous close-up of a man's face, absolutely devoid of expression, and cut it into three short lengths; after each piece they inserted a short shot of another object—first a plate of soup, then a dead woman in a coffin, and finally a child playing with a toy, so that on the screen it appeared that the man was looking at these objects in turn. The film thus composed was then shown to an ordinary audience.

"The result," says Pudovkin, "was terrific. The public raved about the acting of the artist. They pointed out the heavy pensiveness of his mood over the forgotten soup, were touched and moved by the deep sorrow with which he looked on the dead woman, and admired the light, happy smile with which he surveyed the girl at play. But we knew that in all three cases the face was exactly the same."

Every member of the audience had, in fact, *projected* his or her own thoughts on to the face of that man. They had read their own reactions into his expression—or lack of expression—just as they would while watching



PLATE I.

... "SELECTING ONLY THE EXCITING PARTS," A COMPOSITE PICTURE FROM A NUMBER OF M.G.M. STILL'S, GIVING THE EFFECT OF CONSTRUCTIVE CUTTING OF A MOTOR ACCIDENT. THE ELEMENTS COMPOSING THIS PICTURE WOULD APPEAR IN RAPID SUCCESSION ON THE SCREEN. (See p. 57.)



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Clive Brook or Anna May Wong, who usually preserve a look of stolid immobility throughout their films.

This simple incident forms the very crux of the coming change in general film-production technique, since it combines roughly the three main principles involved—constructive scenarism and cutting, the retaining in one single hand of plan and action, and the employment of types in place of actors.

In planning this book, I was at some pains to keep these three elements apart, to be considered separately; but they are so dovetailed together that it is almost impossible to dissociate them.

Consider, for example, the employment of types, of which the experiment I have just described is a rough and primitive example.

Its adoption will make it more necessary than ever that the director should be the cutter, since the possible combinations and permutations will be rendered so much more numerous; in other words, the cutter will be able to diverge so much farther from the director's intention.

Why, however, substitute types for actors at all, if the complex business of film-production is to be further complicated thereby?

The answer is that it will *not* be further complicated, simply because the Kinist, who has everything in his own hand, will arrive; and the constructive editing in its fullest sense (including constructive scenarism) will follow his arrival, since he is the fellow who will do it.

There are three main reasons for using types instead of actors; two were established shortly after the War by the Russians, and one has been added by Hollywood.

The Russians were first to envisage the fact that make-up, such as is used on the stage, is unconvincing

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to the camera; they therefore began to use types, who could not *act*, as we understand acting (that is, *sustain* a mood or character) but who *were* the characters.

Now it is all very well to have *character* represented, but to tell a story we must have *emotion* as well; and to do this the Russian producer resorted to two methods—or, if you like, trickery of two kinds. He employed constructive editing (as exemplified by the expressionless face regarding the soup, corpse, and child in succession) and he induced in his player, or actor, or type, real emotion quite divorced from the apparent subject of it.

This latter is instanced by the way in which Pudovkin achieved the effect of a crowd of Mongols rapturously regarding a priceless fur. *He photographed them as they watched a Chinese conjuror!*

Rapture is rapture, whatever its cause. The audience, watching the film, saw only the Mongols and the fur, and never suspected the existence of the conjuror.

A widely-separate instance comes to my mind. Madeleine Carroll, the beautiful school-teacher B.A. who has become one of our most glamorous stage actresses and has also enjoyed some popularity on the screen, played a few years ago in a French film called *Instinct*, made in France.

In it she had to be miserable—and she simply *was* miserable. Her misery, however, had nothing whatever to do with the subject of the film; it was merely a result of her being so ruthlessly bullied and browbeaten by producer and director that she cried herself to sleep every night and woke up crying every morning.

That film, unfortunately, was a silent one, produced at the very moment when the world went talkie-mad, and consequently, like many good silent films of the period,

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it had to be shelved: but people who saw it tell me that it would have been hailed as a great acting performance, which would have placed Madeleine Carroll at the very top of the film-ladder.

That is what I meant when I said that Alfred Hitchcock, George Pearson, Maurice Elvey and the rest were sufficiently ruthless. While directing, they have only one object in view—the attainment of their “shot”. All other considerations must go by the board. If it is necessary to wheedle a player into the proper frame of mind, they wheedle. If sarcasm seems more likely to be effective, they are scathingly sarcastic; they neither spare nor spoil their players—and they achieve their effects.

I used to be amazed at the varying opinions different players had of one director's nature, until I realised that they had been playing rôles which had necessitated different treatment: he had coaxed one, stormed at another, as the script or the occasion demanded—and each imagined that to be his normal manner.

This brings us a step farther in our argument. If it is possible to superimpose, as it were, these effects, why bother to use actors at all? Indeed, are not actors, trained to simulation, less likely to react naturally to stimulation?

And here the actor's champion leaps down into the arena.

“Since,” he retorts, “actors *can* reproduce these emotions, without suffering or subterfuge, why not employ them?”

Here we come to our third argument in favour of the employment of types—the high price of film-acting.

In this country we do not suffer so severely from inflation of salaries; but even here, players receive for their



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screen work much more than they do on the stage. There is nothing even distantly approaching Constance Bennett's grotesque reputed £6,000 a week, but in many cases the salary is out of all proportion to the value of the player.

A particular player's services on the stage are probably inestimable. That is his *milieu*. By his art and artifices, his natural gifts of mimicry and his laboriously-acquired technique, he can convince us, grip us, enthrall us, hold the mirror up to Nature for our interest and pleasure. We need him.

We have needed him, too, on the screen, during the period in which there has been no proper understanding of the art of Cinema, while films have been merely a photographic representation of stage acting; but even then, had we realised it, we could have done without him, for in the days of silent films we placed in important rôles numbskulls of both sexes whose only claim to stardom lay in their physical perfection and their blind obedience.

Even to these figureheads, who would have been utterly at sea had they been asked to walk on to a stage and play a part, fabulous sums were paid; the coming of talkies, which set back constructive editing four or five years, banished them from the screen, since they could not even be trusted to deliver a line of dialogue to the satisfaction of the microphone in its then state of development; and many of them now expect to be tempted back to the studios by the offer of further fabulous sums—purely on the strength of the spurious publicity they formerly received!

They would be well advised to seek other employment (if, in their improvidence, they need it) or retire into

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decent obscurity, for once the falsity of the present economics of Film-land is properly understood there will be such a holocaust among film players that the greatest massacres in history will by comparison pale into insignificance.

## CHAPTER VI

### DEPRIVATIONS AND COMPENSATIONS

Not easily or without travail will the change-over from Theatre-Cinema to true Cinema take place. There will be a re-organisation as sweeping as that necessitated by the coming of talkies, but with three main differences.

(a) It will be a progressive instead of a retrogressive step.

(b) It will save money for the film trade instead of costing more.

(c) It will not *noticeably* affect the general public, except that considerable section which stands or falls by the stars.

The film-actor (as he will probably still continue to be called by courtesy for some years) will in time receive no more credit for his appearance on the screen than does the artist's model for the painting in which she figures; there may possibly be an inquisitive interest evinced in the private life of a popular film-type, just as there is interest in the private life of an artist's model; but there will no longer be the veneration which a great actor or actress commands, who has dedicated his or her talents and life's work to the service of the public, for the film-type will only bring such talents as the artist's model possesses—physical suitability, obedience, and endurance.

For these, he or she will ordinarily be paid in propor-

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tion to working hours and effort little more than the artist's model receives; the film-type will be picked up here, there, anywhere, used in one or two films, and discarded, for it will be realised that the story is the important thing, and the reappearance of a familiar face will be just as palling and distracting as the repeated use of a camera-trick or a certain set would be.

Only in series and sequels will the same faces be used, to represent the same character; producers will have abandoned the confused mental attitude which could result in one character being played by two different players in successive films from the same studio, or three totally different conceptions of Sherlock Holmes being launched from as many studios within a few weeks. (*Vide* my remarks on the value of co-operation on page 85.)

Of course, attempts will be made by a few reactionary producers to popularise "types" whom they will have rashly placed on long contract; but, just as no one expects much interest to be evinced in the young men or women who pose, however patiently and obediently, for photographic advertisements of sardines or hire-purchase furnishers, so no one will be seriously interested in the private lives of the film-types.

Worship, certainly, dies hard, as the still-packed mailbags of many of the fallen stars of yesteryear can testify; but once the new principle is generally adopted, the allegiance of the fans will follow their sovereign lords or ladies into the theatre, or into oblivion, as the case may be.

There will always be "fans"—men and women, boys and girls, who must have someone to adore, and select as an object of worship the more glamorous of those

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personalities which seem to provide their favourite kind of entertainment. I say "seem to provide it", for the illusion of great acting has been carefully fostered by the publicity pundits even on behalf of those stars who have no more hand in making the film than tubes of oils have in painting a picture.

Achievement always commands a measure of our respect and admiration; and so the astute publicity agent bawls "Behold Miss Tottie Tiptoes—a Success! By sheer hard work, brilliance, and force of character she has attained to a three-years contract, a mansion in Beverly Hills with two swimming-pools, a staff of servants, white and coloured, five cars ditto, a string of polo-ponies and several of pearls, a wardrobe full of priceless frocks, a cabinet full of priceless clocks, a cellar full of priceless hocks. . . ."

Whereupon we suitably adore her and flock to see her films; and when as a result of utter incompetence she flops, and hocks her frocks and clocks and docks her servants wages and lets her mansion and retires to a fourteen-roomed cottage and heroic poverty, her army of fans assail the producers with abuse for not continuing to feature her—whereas their fault really lies in their not having paid her seventy dollars a week and beaten her soundly when they wanted her to look miserable and promised her a rise in salary when they wanted joy, and prevented her by hook or crook from ever trying to act.

The sooner Miss Tiptoes has the crutch of publicity pulled away from beneath her, the better for films and for all of us. There is no aspect of the film-world more pernicious than that perverted type of publicity which anticipates the event—the kind that builds up a name in the hope that its bearer will live up to it.

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The credit for the film will belong in the future to the Kinist, *because he made it*; and signs are not lacking that the interest of the fans is already beginning to veer round towards the men who make the films, rather than the people who play in them.

With the stars removed, the main personal interest will be centred upon these men, or in some cases, and I think increasingly, women—especially when these men and women bear the responsibility and credit for making the whole film, and not merely a bit of it.

We can safely trust the publicity department to spare no effort to create an aura of glamour round the Kinists; and if by chance we ever have a Kinist who is handsome as well as clever, he can reckon in time upon such a fan-following as Valentino never dreamed.

Of course, there are certain stars whose brilliance will not perceptibly dim with the coming of daylight in the film-firmament. A handful of great actors of the stage, and a few indigenous to films, may elect to remain in the studios; and, provided their demands are not inordinate, it would be unwise of producers to wish to remove them while they can still give joy to thousands and attract millions of dollars to the box-office; but they will be anachronisms.

It would, for instance, be uneconomic to have an Arliss, a Chatterton, a Beery, or a Harding wasting his or her talents in a medium in which a Smith, a Brown, a Jones, or a Robinson would be equally useful; but worse than this, such adherence to the creaking mechanism of the past would rob a re-awakening Theatre of stalwarts whose aid she sorely needed.

Britain will have a double advantage over America when the change comes about; in the first place she has

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hitched her wagon less firmly to the stars than Hollywood has, and in the second she has her film-production where there will be a never-failing source of film-types of every kind—on the fringes of the capital city of her Empire. To be sure, Los Angeles is only a few miles from Hollywood—but its population is only about an eighth of London's.

What keeps the thousands of crowd-people in Hollywood?

Not, certainly, the glamour of crowd-work, for that wears off at about the second visit to the studios; they are captives of an Idea—the possibility of their one day owning, like Tottie Tiptoes, a mansion with two swimming-pools, a staff of servants . . . and so on, because they know that such wealth and luxury and prominence *may* come, *can* come, *does* occasionally come at the approving nod of a director or the roving glance of a chief executive's nephew.

How long will they stay when they realise that the highest prize which film-work has to offer them counts for little more than crowd-work in pay or importance? When the director who can frighten them at the psychological moment, the Chinese cameraman who can cunningly photograph them with a light flickering across their immobile faces will properly receive all the credit for their change of expression, while they themselves will never see their names in print?

Hollywood will be drained of her floating population of extras within a year, unless she offer far greater crowd-payment than at present, which seems extremely unlikely.

This is Britain's chance; as soon as our film prosperity in open competition, or a lucky spin of the wheel of

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Fortune, gives us a breathing-space and a little spare cash, we should begin to experiment in what practically amounts to a new medium; we should make films with unknown and unskilled players, but calling to our aid every subterfuge and artifice which Griffith or Eisenstein or Fritz Lang or—better still—our own ingenuity can suggest to us.

The Russians, the French, and the Germans engage and retain our attention with faces we have never seen, belonging to men and women about whose income, matrimonial irregularities, and favourite breakfast-food we have never been informed.

Surely—*surely*—we can do it too?



## CHAPTER VII

### THE DEARTH OF STORIES

"THERE are no stories left!" exclaim the film-producers in despair. "They were all used up long ago!"

If it comes to that, the 117 ways of cooking a potato were all used up long ago—yet we continue to eat and enjoy potatoes.

The favourite story with children is *Cinderella*; and whenever *Cinderella* (in a more adult vein, but intrinsically the same) is done with Janet Gaynor in the title-rôle it is a roaring success.

If producers would abandon their vain hunt for new plots, dress the old ones up in new clothes, give them a new twist, and produce them superbly, we should be satisfied. Instead of that, they give us a new story, or what they fondly imagine to be a new story, in old clothes.

A man of electric genius occasionally emits a spark of brilliance in spite of the careful insulation of the studios, and a good film is the result; and whatever the peculiar setting he exploits, his film is followed by many, many others in the same setting—from his own studio as well as all the others.

This is known as a film cycle. We expect a flight of fancy, and find ourselves watching a cycle-race.

We have had a backstage cycle, a war cycle, a college cycle, a horserace cycle, a gangster cycle, a prison

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cycle, a shipboard cycle, a newspaper-office cycle, a horror cycle, a sky-scraper-in-course-of-erection cycle, a hotel cycle, a surgery cycle; now, thanks to the success of *Shanghai Express*, we are threatened with a train cycle. In fact, a film called *Rome Express* has just been made at Shepherd's Bush—though in fairness I should add that it was on the agenda a year ago, and has only been waiting for the new Gaumont studios to be ready.

These dreary successions of productions with similar settings are put out from the studios in blissful oblivion of the fact that it is the story, the photography, the lighting, the dialogue, the acting—anything, almost, rather than the environment which arouses interest in the first of each series. No one has yet offered any satisfactory theory to account for this extraordinary kink on the part of producers. It's just one of those things, and life is a bowl of cherries, and you don't have to be crazy but it helps a lot . . . and murmuring these time-honoured comments Hollywood and Elstree go about their business—and the cycle system persists. . . .

The producers of films in this year of Grace 1932 have one very important lesson to learn from the story-tellers of a thousand years earlier—that a story should have a beginning, a middle, and an end; that it should, in fact, be built up carefully on a definite skeleton which is the Plot; that this skeleton should have a tough silver wire running through it which is the Theme; and that once the production is embarked upon, it is too late to change either plot or theme.

The theme of a film story should be capable of compression into ten words, the plot into a hundred. This is a pretty safe test for unity, and unity is a *sine qua non* of a successful picture.

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This quality of unity is one that is most consistently overlooked by producers. They cherish (with one or two honourable exceptions) certain fixed rules for the satisfaction of the box-office, and any story which is selected for production must conform to these rules.

It is no uncommon thing for a producer to come down to the "floor" and tell the director "Look here, we've decided to alter the end of this; you haven't shot the scene where she kills him yet? We won't have her killing him after all, then; it'd be bad box-office, and bad for her publicity—and remember she's under contract to us for two more pictures. We're going to have her catch sight of a portrait of her mother on the wall, and then she changes her mind, and we can have her marry this other fellow instead of going to prison, see? Much better . . ."

But the mystery is, why buy the story at all if it is necessary to alter it so radically? For any alteration to the end *is* radical.

Supposing the theme of that story is the Possible Justification of Murder. The plot, presumably, will have been constructed especially with a view to expounding this theme in the most vivid manner. Mark the word "constructed". Not slung together with a beginning and two middles, or two beginnings and an end.

That plot, if it is a good plot and worthy of cinematic treatment, is skilfully, carefully, and imaginatively built up and dovetailed, with the action arising naturally from the characters of the protagonists, and every tiny particle of incident designed with a view to a logical, inescapable development.

That is how a good play is written. That is how a good film is written—but it is no longer a good film by the

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time it has been tampered with by self-appointed experts who would be far better employed in their own departments. It is sometimes argued that the average director would be "nowhere" without a supervisor to whom he could run for help; but remove the supervisor, throw the director on his own devices, and watch him rise superior to his problems. No one ever yet learned to drive a car with an expert sitting beside him; it is during that nightmare first drive alone that he really learns.

There are certain basic rules which govern the construction of drama, whether that drama be comedy or tragedy. It should open in such a way as to be convincing, whatever fantastic heights of imagination it may lead us to later on; and it must open with something that immediately captures our interest and attention.

Further, it must build up our interest gradually to a climax—not a succession of climaxes with valleys of boredom between.

An example of faulty story-construction is to be found in that highly successful prison film *The Big House*, which Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer produced in 1931.

Our interest is built up, with uncanny skill and all the resources of Cinema, to an open revolt in a large American prison. The growing dissatisfaction among the convicts stimulates our interest, and the suspense is cleverly increased until it culminates in a masterly scene in the dining-hall where several hundreds of convicts throw their tin mugs about.

And what happens? The leader of the rebels, one Butch, is placed in solitary confinement—and the whole business of building-up the suspense starts again from the beginning.

Then a "jail-break" is planned. Once more we are

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held in suspense, knowing the details of the plot the men are hatching, knowing also the peculiar dangers of the attempt. It is only partially successful . . . and once more we start all over again, building up the suspense to the great and final climax—a prison revolt.

There we have three “peaks” in one film. The result was, as I have said, effective. If the interest and excitement had been built successively up to the three peaks, each being higher than its predecessor, and *not* been allowed to flag between, it would have been terrific.

I am an implacable opponent of the “photographed stage play” type of film; nevertheless, there are certain peculiarities which the screen-play must share with the stage-play, the novel, and the short story. There must be a premise, a development, and a logical conclusion.

One of the worst examples I have ever known of a hopelessly bad film story was that of *Champagne*, a silent picture designed as a “vehicle” for Betty Balfour; I make no apology for dragging it from its decent oblivion, because the interests of science demand a subject for autoptical examination.

First of all, it was decided by the studio executives that *Champagne* was a good title for a film. It had never been used before. It was brief, and suggested sparkle, froth, and luxury. A story must be written to match that title.

It was; but what a story! Everyone had a shot at it in turn—the scenario-writer, the scenario-editor, the director (Alfred Hitchcock, if you please!), the assistant, the players themselves. Bits were added, chunks were cut out, no one knew overnight what the next day’s shooting was going to be about, for someone had taken the script home to “try and do something with it”.

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The result was such an expensive botch and bungle as has seldom emanated from any studio, despite the heroic efforts of the cutting department to get it into shape.

Unfortunately, however, it is not only in the case of stories written in the studios that such mutilation is practised.

The movie-magnate's mental processes are notoriously tortuous when he begins to think about stories. A successful novel is published, a successful stage play is produced in the West End, and good publicity is acquired; whereupon the producer of films, oblivious of the fact that novels and plays have, in general, a common public and films quite another, purchases the film rights for a tidy sum.

Is this because the novel or the play will make a good film? By no means; merely because public attention—fondly assumed to be *general* public attention—has been attracted which will be useful in publicising the film—and also because the “scoop” of securing the subject will reflect credit on the purchasing company. Indeed, it is quite frequently necessary to reshape the entire novel or play for film purposes, retaining only the title.

And when the film is made, the exhibitors protest that the title is “not good box-office”, and it is changed to a label containing some such “box-office” word as love, marriage, wedding, divorce, angel, girl, woman, lady, bride, bed, night, morals, or passion.

I have known this to happen literally dozens of times. The one advantage in buying the film-rights of the story is thus discounted, and the producing company has yet another “flop” on its hands and pathetically wonders why.

When Elinor Glyn floated her own production com-

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pany in England she invited representative members of the film Press to tea, and asked for their opinions of the kind of film likely to prove popular with British audiences.

Fortunately she took no notice of their suggestions, which were so contradictory that they would have driven the poor lady crazy if she had tried to carry them out; but there was one point of general agreement which indicated such a total misapprehension of the principles concerned as to be interesting. My brother-scribes were almost unanimous in asserting that the one kind of film *not* required was the costume-film.

Shade of *Ben-Hur*, what heresy is here!

Certainly "costume" cannot make a film a success, but neither can it make it a failure. Experience has shown that the period, the setting, the atmosphere, in which the story is placed matters little, provided it is authentic. What matters is the story itself, and the production—which is the way in which the story is told.

The unfortunate fact is that many producers have set out to make period films for their own sake, relying on the pictorial quality of the costumes and settings to carry a feeble story to success. Certainly Mankind likes a picture to look at—but Mankind has become accustomed in the cinema to having also a story unfolded.

Producers share, too, the popular misconception that our forefathers were in their speech invariably long-winded, circumlocutory, ponderous, and pompous. This is largely due to the mediaeval dramatists, who regarded the theatre, rightly or wrongly, as the place for theatric-  
alities, and in their efforts to render their characters impressive tended to make them bombastic and dithyrambic.

The talkie, however, has or should have progressed

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beyond this misapprehension. It should be able to plunge with equal success into the past and the future, adapting the speech of the period to our own needs while preserving the atmosphere.

History tells us that our forefathers lived swiftly, strongly, vividly, however slowly they may have travelled.

It is possible and desirable to instil that swiftness, that strength, that vividness into our films. We have an almost inexhaustible source of inspiration just behind us, and the sooner we turn about and examine it, the better.

Let us not be dismayed by the reception of certain historical and "period" films already produced. Mistakes were made which would have been enough to damn any film, were its setting in the past, the present, or the future.

If we concentrate on a good story well told, we cannot go wrong.

One of the most deadly weapons to the hand of the satirical giber at films is, curiously enough, one of the most archaic—to wit, the ancient jest about film-plots coming ready-made from the filing-cabinet.

This is the kind of stock-phrase our critics use when they run short of ideas and have to get to press by midnight with their criticism: "The plot of this film is our old friend B6, in which the heroine, who works as a typist," etc. Or perhaps "The C15 drawer must have been nearly empty when this plot was taken out and dusted. . . ."

I contend, however, that this weapon, though dangerous, is hardly an arm of precision, since it fails to hit its true mark; criticism should be aimed, not at the shortage



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of plots which nobody can help, but at the stereotyped manner of presenting them.

There are no new plots for novels or stage-plays or magazine-stories—yet we comparatively seldom see two plays or stories alike, because they are dressed up differently. Yet the similarity in film-stories is left without decent covering—chiefly because, however well the story-writer may do his work, the producer insists on a box-office ending, and all box-office endings are exactly the same.

The solution of the story problem lies in two essentials—story-writers who have a proper understanding of their craft, and producers who present these stories in the most advantageous manner, conforming to certain accepted standards but not cramping the plot into that hideous strait-jacket labelled “box-office”.

When I see a film whose story tells us something, logically, progressively, and inevitably, about human nature, I whoop with joy; but very few of my visits to the cinema could be described as whoopee.

## CHAPTER VIII

### DOLLARS DOWN THE DRAIN

SOME weeks ago, standing on the floor of one of our most magnificent and up-to-date studios, I happened to ask a young member of the administrative staff how the current production stood in relation to its schedule.

"Oh, miles behind!" he replied. "But you expect that. The conditions governing film-production make it impossible to work to a schedule, and always will. Lamps burst, the film jams, the mike goes wrong—a thousand and one incidents may happen. That's one of the things we're up against."

Someone once described haggis as "fine confused feedin'"; my young friend's remarks indicated fine confused thinking—a very mental haggis.

He is one of the young men upon whom the British film industry proposes to rely in a few years. He has already had long experience in studios in various subordinate capacities, and is rapidly qualifying for a responsible post. Yet he was in earnest.

". . . Conditions . . . make it impossible to work to a schedule . . . and always will. . . . That's one of the things we're up against."

That last remark indicates that he realises the disadvantage in the conditions he so calmly and fatalistically describes. But unfortunately "One of the things we're

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up against" means, in his mind, "One of the burdens under which film-production is groaning," not "One of the problems with which we are grappling" as the words "up against" suggest.

I know that lamp-bulbs burst, that the camera runs out of film, that the director runs out of the studio to telephone his home, that the players run off to matinées, that stars throw temperaments, that the dialogist thinks of a clever bit of dialogue, that the general manager comes on to the floor to talk to the producer. I see these things happening almost every day of my life.

And I refuse absolutely to accept their inevitability, because I know also that signalmen can doze, that engine-drivers can get drunk, that time-tables can be confused, that electric signals can short-circuit, that landslides can occur—and that the Flying Scotsman would never reach Edinburgh if these things were allowed to happen. It is only because men highly skilled in organisation confer together and think of a way of preventing them that they *don't* happen.

It is time, and more than time, that film-production shook itself free from the antiquated rogue-and-vagabond cloak which it inherited from the Theatre.

The latter has long since discarded it for the discreditable garment that it is. Individual people of the Theatre may still be totally unorganised and slipshod by nature—but you find them succeeding *in spite* of this peculiarity, not *because* of it.

If theatrical rehearsals were conducted in the haphazard, unbusinesslike hit-or-miss manner in which the important business of film-production is approached, the shrift of the Theatre would be a short one indeed. Stern necessity has forced the Theatre to put her house in

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order; the great and unexampled prosperity attending film-production has denied it the purifying and invigorating necessity for struggle and self-discipline and mental stocktaking.

"This is fine!" the Maharajahs of Hollywood and Wardour Street have exclaimed with fat complacency. "This is great! Dollars rolling in! We *must* be right!"

So they have continued to muddle along, with the dollars pouring away down the drain of mismanagement and helplessness; and now that the incoming stream of dollars is temporarily checked, they haven't the least idea how it happened or what to do about it.

"Conditions . . . make it impossible . . . and always will. . . ."

What a declaration of defeat!

I wish that young man could have had a peep into the ramshackle glass-roofed studios of a quarter of a century ago, when production had to stop if the sun went behind a cloud, when the camera had to be reloaded every minute or so of shooting because film-stock only came in fifty-foot lengths, when the film kept breaking, when the producer had to go down to the grocer on the corner to borrow enough money to pay the staff because he had forgotten it was Friday, when the company secretary had to help some of the cast to make-up, and while he was doing that the sausages burnt which he was frying for the company's lunch . . .

But my young friend *was* in the studios when talkies burst into them, when the microphone had to be held at the end of a long bamboo pole over the heads of the players, when the slightest extraneous sound ruined the "take", and the camera-booth was covered with bits of tarpaulin, sacking, army blankets, old trench-coats, bed-

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quilts, ground-sheets, newspaper—anything that would keep the whirr of the camera in.

At those two periods my young defeatist would have been amazed at the progress which would be made in the course of a few years; and if he could realise that, he would be equally amazed at the long periods of stagnation during which he and others more responsible could accept the standard reached as a *ne plus ultra*.

If lamp-bulbs burst, lamp-bulbs should be perfected; no one would be more indignant than the producer if his drawing-room lamps at home started popping off. There is no excuse whatsoever at this stage, after thirty-five years of continuous cinematography, for the cameraman to run out of film during a take or just before one; he would kick himself hard if he were to run out of petrol on the way home. Temperament is a luxury which the studios cannot afford, and in which the serious artist does not commonly indulge; in any case, the serious artist will before long yield place to the "type", who will be run out of the studio in double-quick time if he or she tries any hanky-panky tricks. Proper organisation of shooting, of the detailed kind which I forecast in an earlier chapter, will preclude any necessity for discussions on the floor.

Production will proceed on factory methods. No one would ever suggest that the music of the modern gramophone is any less "artistic" for being made in a factory employing modern methods. Music could not be composed in a factory, but it doesn't have to be. It is composed before it ever reaches the factory, and executed and reproduced under the most auspicious conditions in the factory itself.

Similarly with a film. It is composed at a desk, in an

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separate electrician, and each of these men has to be told exactly where to direct his beam.

Imagine the confusion when the cameraman, who controls this lighting process, is a foreigner, as is so frequently the case.

"You—you!" he vociferates. "She sinks, she sinks!"

"He means yours, Bill," says the chief electrician. "Hike it up a shade. It's sagging—that's what he means."

But it isn't. "She sinks" eventually proves itself to be "lower it a trifle. . . ."

Even in a unilingual studio the difficulty is real enough, for the terms "a fraction", "a trifle", "a shade" allow a wide margin of misunderstanding where exactness is essential; and an overheated cameraman down on the floor frequently has great difficulty in explaining to two overheated electricians squeezed close together on the gantry under the roof which of them he means. . . .

This, as Euclid was wont to remark, is absurd. A co-ordinated system of lamps, worked from a single position near the camera, should be quite easily arranged and installed, and the lamps themselves should be as mobile as the camera.

One of the first steps towards economy of time and money in the studio would be the appointment of a delay-swatter, whose business would be to check every delay on the floor in the process of production, investigate its root cause, and discover or invent a way to remove that cause.

His activities would include accounting for every occasion on which the "N.G." board—signalising a spoiled "take"—was hoisted in front of the camera. If, as my young defeatist friend claims and I deny, film-

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production labours under disadvantages which cannot be removed, there is all the more reason for removing those that can.

We need not be afraid of Teutonic efficiency "cramping our style". Provided factory methods are not applied to the really creative part, the construction of the scenario, studio efficiency can only be beneficial.

I should like, moreover, to see inter-studio organisation—for instance, co-operation in the matter of sets.

When the traffic-jam sequence in *Jack's the Boy* was shot, the Gainsborough Company hired the permanent street-set at Welwyn from British International for the purpose, instead of building one specially. Similarly a certain set representing the interior of the Old Bailey has been used five or six times in as many studios. The *There Goes the Bride* unit migrated from Beaconsfield to Shepherd's Bush to use the enormous railway-terminus set built for *Rome Express*. Some of the "back-projection" film taken for *Rome Express* was used in the British & Dominion film *Yes, Mr. Brown*.

An extension of this principle would effect a saving of thousands of pounds a year.

We are fortunate in having none of the fantastic executives' salaries of Hollywood, which in the boom years the overlords of the studios voted themselves in perpetuity. Some of them run into thousands of pounds weekly, and these disproportionate payments are such a weight about Hollywood's neck that she cannot step into a puddle without being almost submerged.

Compared with these princely emoluments, the salaries paid to our studio chiefs are a pittance; and yet many of them are paid more than their services are worth—not because they do not work hard, but because excessive

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and misplaced zeal makes them try to do everyone else's work instead of attending to their own.

As heads of departments in our studios we have plenty of intelligent and enthusiastic economists who deplore the present muddle and mess; but no satisfactory solution can be found without a complete central reorganisation—and meanwhile the dollars are slipping irretrievably down the drain.



## CHAPTER IX

### "CAMERA!"

BETWEEN the point near the end of the Nineteenth Century when a motion-picture was first set up to take moving pictures of a moving object, reproducing it as it would appear to the eye of a beholder, and the point at which the camera is employed as an active agent in telling the story, there is a great gulf, representing far more than a mere thirty-five years of mechanical progress.

It indicates the acceptance of a root-principle.

In telling a story, if we know how to do it, we select exactly those words and phrases which will most vividly convey an idea to our listeners.

For instance, I once heard Sir Patrick Hastings, the eminent K.C., describing to a jury how his clients had been inveigled into parting with their life's savings.

"The pit was dug," he exclaimed, "and my clients fell slap, bang into it."

The phrase may not have been strictly forensic, but it was so picturesque as to grip the imagination; it suggested action; it was, in fact, a verbal motion picture.

Now if Sir Patrick had said "my clients were swindled", that would have expressed the fact of the case, but without making any appeal to the imagination. His chosen phrase suggests the viewpoint of the spectator who stands indignantly by and watches the event

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happening; and this is precisely what the film-camera of to-day does for us.

The analogy is not perfect; analogies seldom are; but it may serve to illustrate a difference.

There are two main methods by which the art of the cameraman may provide us with this illusion of being actually concerned in the events depicted rather than merely looking at a picture. One is active, and the other passive; and for the provision of neither, be it noted, is the cameraman responsible—only for their execution. His credit lies, or should lie, in the quality of the photography, not in the camera's viewpoint. The latter is the responsibility of the scenario-writer and the director—or, ideally, of the Kinist alone.

Consider the active method first. Here we have the camera itself—which is to represent the spectator himself, remember—in motion.

To take a simple case, let us suppose a man is to be photographed walking down a street, away from the spectator. The camera of yesteryear would stay solidly on its three flat feet and watch him go; the camera of to-day follows him up with a "trucking" (or "tracking") shot, being mounted on a truck which frequently runs along a specially-laid track.

What is the principle involved in this change? Is the tracking shot merely to suggest that the spectator is potentially omnipresent, and can observe the man as nearly and clearly in spite of his departure? This defeats its own end, for it serves no useful purpose to send the man away from us if we are to follow him; departure, even of the most temporary, should be invested with an air of finality, since finality is the essence of departure.

But supposing the street down which the man walks

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is thronged with hostile people. It then becomes the duty of the camera to bring us near enough to these people to show their expressions of hostility, and the obvious way to do that is to take the place of the man as he walks, pivoting from left to right and back again as the walker might glance about him at the threatening faces.

This use of the camera is already attaining the virtue of maturity. I remember Hales Tours of over twenty years ago, for which in a long stationary railway-coach one took one's seat facing a screen at one end, upon which motion-pictures appeared which had been taken from the front of moving trains and trams in various parts of the world. The illusion was heightened by mechanism which rocked the coach as if it were actually travelling.

There, and in the familiar shot from the deck of a ship in a rough sea, with the horizon swinging up and down, we have the same principle—the moving camera, which takes the place of the spectator's eye; and this principle, as we have seen in the case of the man walking down the street, can be applied to create the illusion of the audience standing temporarily in the shoes of a character in the film and looking out of his eyes; *becoming*, in fact, the character.

Two particularly effective examples of this come to my mind, and both from war films.

The first is a shot in *All Quiet on the Western Front*, in which the camera assumes the position of a German machine-gunner, and follows in a wide panning (or panoramic) shot the sweep of the gun from left to right, as it mows down the advancing French infantrymen.

The illusion thus provided of the spectator being actually the person who fires the gun heightens enor-

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mously the effect of the carnage, and gives the audience a sensation of actual participation; and this effect is achieved even more markedly in an incident in that monumental air film *Hell's Angels*.

We are shown a British airman, during the War, in single combat with a Zeppelin which has come over to bomb London.

His ammunition exhausted, he realises that his only hope of bringing the monster down is by crashing his machine into the envelope and so setting it alight.

We see in close-up his face with its jaw set and its eyes starting from their sockets as he makes this supreme decision, which must mean a terrible death for him.

We watch him circle round, climb to his position for the death dive, and begin his descent, to the accompaniment of a deafening scream of engines—and suddenly it is we who are sitting in his place, strapped to the pilot's seat and swooping to death at a hundred miles an hour!

Swiftly the cigar-shaped bag rises to meet us . . . we are upon it . . . there is a blinding flash, blackness . . . and silence. . . .

We are, for a second, to all intents and purposes dead, even though the flash was the flash of six inches of magnesium wire, and the darkness was the shutter of the camera.

I contend that such camera-tricks (as we may continue to call them for convenience, though in reality they are scenario-tricks) are fully justified by results; we are being told the story of that pilot's deed and death, and if we can be taken inside his very brain, so much the better is the story told.

Now to consider the other type of camera-effect—the passive.

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Here we have the camera stationary, and things happening *at* it and *around* it and *across* it—orientated to it and near enough to provide an effect of contact.

In this case also the audience is made participatory, either in the place of the character or in such close juxtaposition as to experience his sensations.

The familiar shot of a burly man threatening a smaller one is a case in point. He advances towards the camera, looming over it as he would over the man he is threatening, and punches straight at the lens. His fist seems to come straight at the beholder's eye, huge and menacing—and at the moment of impact there is darkness in which appears a shower of sparks and stars.

The audience has thus experienced a smack in the eye, and can sympathise with the victim a hundred times more fully than if it had merely sat by and watched the two men while the blow was struck.

If you were fortunate enough to see Pudovkin's *The End of St. Petersburg*, you will remember the scene in which the young peasant (played, mark you, by a young peasant with no acting experience) came to look for the capitalist who had betrayed his comrade. I say "came", because the audience for the moment *became* the capitalist, shrinking from retribution.

There were three short shots, as effective as a thousand feet of distant aerial battle as seen in *Hell's Angels*. First a midshot of the youth standing furious in the doorway, followed by a sub-title "Where is the Boss?" Then a semi-close-up of the youth, perhaps three yards nearer, his expression unchanged, followed by a sub-title in larger type, "*Where is the Boss?*" And lastly a full close-up of the youth, followed by the sub-title hugely repeated "*WHERE IS THE BOSS?*"

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This avenging figure, coming at the spectator as it were in leaps, had a shattering effect; there was no attempt at pure realism, yet it was not wholly symbolic. The effect was rather as though the spectator had shudderingly closed his eyes for a second and found the enemy nearer on re-opening them.

This, of course, entails constructive scenarism, but it also aptly illustrates the *passive* use of the camera in suggesting audience participation.

Any kind of a catastrophe can be enormously enhanced by this means; in the case of a shipwreck, the effect of photographing an agitated tank of water through a window in its side, with the camera on a level with the surface, now submerged and now emerging, gives a graphic impression of the viewpoint of a man washed overboard and struggling in the sea.

Panic scenes give wide scope for imaginative camera-work. The Kinist, while he is constructing his scenario, imagines himself caught in a panic and infected by it, and pictures to himself (for he thinks entirely in terms of pictures, remember) what he would see in such a case.

He would have a confused mental vision of bodies hurrying, jostling against him—a terrified face here and there, flung into sight for a moment and as quickly withdrawn, like corks on a rough sea—a converging of forces, of strained faces, as the crowd encounters a narrow exit—a surging upward of bodies as he slips to his knees—the confused and cruel battering of boots as he is trodden underfoot by the throng. . . .

He may be confident of securing these shots, for the modern cameraman with his hand-camera can barge right into the *mêlée* and secure practically any shot required.

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The Kinist will decide, when preparing his script, the order in which these things are to appear on the screen, and the length of each shot—in other words, the rhythm of the scene; he will probably cut these various shots into short lengths and use two or three of each, alternating them rapidly and even superimposing them to achieve the effect of confusion.

In his detailed scenario, or “treatment”, which should fix absolutely the form of the completed film, he will show these brief cuts in the order in which they will finally appear on the screen; but for the “shooting script”, which will be prepared in production conference and which will dictate the exact order in which these scenes are to be shot (governed by considerations of expedience), he—or a trained subordinate—will perform the familiar algebraic process of “collecting the like quantities”.

I wish to emphasise that in this process, as in the actual pictorial composition of the shot, the cameraman should have no say. It has been the rule (or rather the misrule) in Germany, where the purely optical side of camera-work has reached a high state of perfection, for the cameraman to take complete charge of certain types of shot and rearrange the camera-angles to suit his own conception of pictorial values. Pictorial value must depend entirely upon the relation of the shot to the sense which it is intended to convey; you cannot with impunity alter one scene to make it look pretty without disturbing the balance of the sequence—that is to say, if the scenario is properly prepared; of course, the ordinary scenario of to-day could not be disturbed by the alteration of half its shots—it is so haphazard and disjointed already.

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The Kinist, who thinks pictorially, should be able to reproduce his thoughts rapidly and perspicuously on paper, in order to illustrate to the cameraman exactly the pictorial composition of each shot and the camera-angle desired. Harry Lachman, who besides being a prominent director is also a distinguished painter, draws hundreds of rapid sketches showing the exact form of the various pictures he wishes to appear on the screen, for the guidance of the cameraman in setting up his camera. (As shown on the opposite page.)

This approximates the ideal. The cameraman should be a technical agent of the Kinist's intention—not an interpreter of his ideas. His scope should be limited to lighting, suitably to the mood indicated by the Kinist, of the scene to be shot, and the focussing and movement of his camera; his responsibility should be to produce a positive film which approximates as closely as possible to the director's expressed intention; he should also be given facilities for technical experimentation, with a view to embodying the results of such experiment in *future* films.

How many times have I heard the cameraman say to the director "How about an iris-in on this shot?" and the director reply indifferently "All the same to me, old boy!"

Such devices as the iris-in (a spot of light on a black screen which quickly grows into the whole picture) or its opposite the iris-out, or a dissolve or a fade-in or fade-out or mask or tracking-shot or panning-shot or soft-focus, should never be used without definite reason—and the reason must *not* be that such a device gives variety to the whole.

The camera has a field of vision of seldom more than



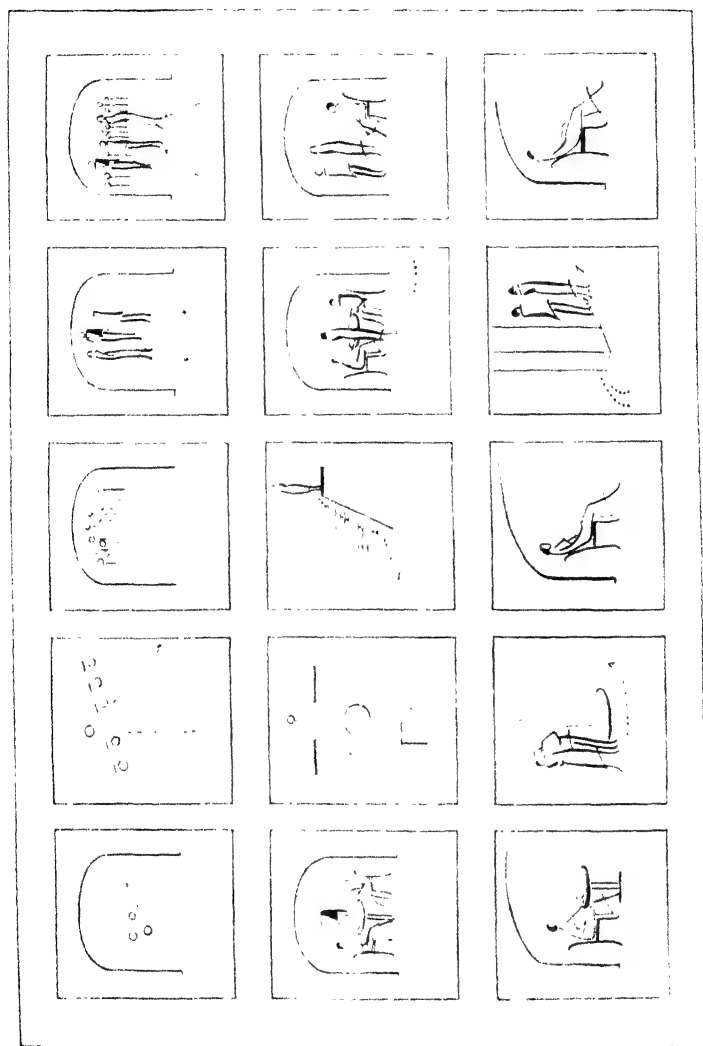


PLATE II.

"HARRY LACHMAN DRAWS SKETCHES OF THE PICTURES HE WISHES TO APPEAR ON THE SCREEN."



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60 degrees, as against the 180 degrees enjoyed by the human eye; to appreciate this difference, look straight at an object in front of you, and you will find that you can see, in addition, what is going on to your due right and left; now close one eye and hold two pencils of equal length in the form of a horizontal T with its base immediately beneath the other eye. The two ends of the further pencil will mark the limits of the camera's ordinary field of vision.

This limitation must be counteracted by mobility and by the employment of such devices as I have mentioned—but *put to their proper use*. For example, let us suppose a shot of a sailor standing on deck, scanning the horizon. He sees, as we see, the sail of a ship—a tiny speck in the distance. He claps his telescope to his eye, and the image on the screen immediately changes to a circle, its area perhaps a third of the whole screen; all around it the screen is black, while filling the circle appears a picture of the sailing-ship.

It is enough; we are that sailor, looking through that telescope at that ship.

This is a legitimate use of a mask, as is also that of two circles, representing field-glasses, similarly used, and of a keyhole to give the effect of "snooping". But do not let us have a mask merely because the scenarist lacks the ingenuity to hold our attention without one.

The same applies to tracking-shots; there is no excuse for the type of shot which introduces one person in a room and then tracks back to include the presence of others, unless there is some vital reason why one should be established in our minds before the others; and even then it is dangerous, for the momentary distraction

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caused by the audience's "getting its bearings" in the room interrupts the dramatic flow.

"Mustn't waste this long corridor!" I heard a director say recently. "We'll track along it; better have the Duke walking ahead, to give us an excuse for tracking."

They may not keep that slow interminable and purposeless tracking-shot in the finished film; but even as an experiment it was costly. Experiments should not be carried out on the floor during production-hours, unless allowed for in the shooting-script. There is no reason why they should not be so allowed for, if the company can afford it and the Kinist, in preparing his scenario, has thought of a new method which is worth trying as an alternative; but if he has an inspiration during production he should make a note of it, mental or literal, for future experiment. There are many to-morrows to come.

I have seen three hundred extras waiting on a set for three days while the camera was "tinkered with" for an experimental shot—which was cut out of the final film. A department-store run on such lines would close its doors in a week.

A notorious example of the use of hackneyed devices merely for the sake of using a device of some sort is our gouty old friend the dissolving wheel.

The heroine is playing roulette; she wins the money and goes on a holiday, or loses and flees the country—it's all one to your unrepentant dissolvist. In either case the roulette-wheel dissolves into the wheel of a train, or the wheel of a car. . . .

You've seen it a score of times.

Dissolves should not be used indiscriminately, merely to pass from one scene to the next. To achieve a definite

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effect, yes; for instance, in a "prison" film some time ago I saw a long-term convict going through the same routine time after time with a continually changing cell-mate, and the scenes merged into each other to indicate his vague idea of the passage of time. This was good; indiscriminate dissolving, like the indiscriminate use of soft-focus or any other device, is merely distracting and irritating.

Nowadays the camera with its wheels and cranes and chutes and portability can go anywhere; and we have such Genies of the Lamp and Lens as Claude Friese-Greene, Jack Cox, Percy Strong, Geoffrey Faithful, Mutz Greenbaum, Alex Bryce, Gunther Krampf, Willard van Enger, and Basil Emmott, to mention a few at random.

The ingenuity and diligence of a host of such men and their predecessors have left our Kinist a valuable legacy in the large number of available "camera-tricks" (to use without offence a phrase which has sometimes been offensively misused). By the employment of his own ingenuity he can turn these to innumerable uses and evolve new tricks of his own; but he would be well advised to keep them firmly in hand and not let them intrude upon his film for their own sake.

As my old and revered drill-sergeant used to say when I was in the Awkward Squad: "Don't climb round yer rifle, me lad; make yer rifle climb round *you*!"

## CHAPTER X

### “HOLD IT!”

ONE of the worst examples of muddle and false economy in our studios is the average still-department.

Stills, in case you are unfamiliar with the term, are the motionless photographs of scenes or characters in the film, taken for purposes of publicity; the functionary who takes them is known as a “still-man”; and the still-man is the Cinderella of the studios, whose fairy-god-mother never turns up.

He is abused, despised, rejected. No time-allowance is ever made for his work in the production-schedule, hardly any expense-allowance in the production-budget. He works under quite unnecessary difficulties, and, miraculously, he endures.

The fruit of his work is put to many uses. It adorns the front of a cinema where the film is being shown, it is used in advertisement, it is published in the Press. It has very definite pulling power, if properly exploited; and in that last phrase lies the secret of the still-man’s martyrdom.

His art is subsidiary to production, and really falls within the province of the publicity department; and the director, supposed to be working to a schedule, is not disposed to put himself out one iota to help the publicity department.

Yet the director is (at least nominally) lord of all on

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the "floor"; and it is therefore he who decides which scenes are suitable subjects for stills; occasionally you hear him say, when pleased with the composition of a scene: "We'll have a still of that"; but more often he conveniently forgets the still-man altogether.

Then the latter, conscious of having to supply a certain quota of stills to the publicity department, edges up diffidently to the Mightiness and murmurs: "What about a still or two?" whereupon the director may, if he is in a good mood, hastily say: "All right, old man, grab a few when we break for lunch, will you?" or, if he has had a bad morning, is more likely to say: "Get to hell out of the way—we're here to make a film." Whereupon the still-man shouldered his heavy tripod-camera and retires into a corner to brood.

This is basically wrong. Stills, in general, must be either valuable or wholly unnecessary. If the latter, there should be no still-man drawing a salary, cluttering the floor, and eating his heart out in impotent inactivity. If the former, the business of taking stills should be placed on a proper footing. Due allowance should be made in the time-table. At present most of the companies that *do* grudgingly admit the desirability of stills being taken, allow about fifteen minutes for six exposures at the end of a sequence—and usually at a time when everyone is feeling "off-colour", and anxious to get away for a meal or to change costume for the next sequence.

The absurd inadequacy of this time-allowance becomes obvious when it is realised that it includes the grouping of the characters and the incidental rearrangement of the lighting and "props".

Even in cases in which the director suddenly remem-

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bers the still-man's existence and shouts for him, there is nearly always a rearrangement of the scene required. One of the peculiar difficulties lies in the fact that, in motion-photography, a scene with a figure moving about in the background is lent, through motion, a quality of stereoscopy; the background figure attains its correct size in relation to the foreground figures; whereas in a still picture the background figure appears disproportionately small. Thus a scene which has full cinematic value may be useless for purposes of still-photography, and necessitate a regrouping, in which the figures must be at approximately the same distance from the camera, or else have some distributed in the middleground to lessen the contrast in size between foreground and background figures.

This accounts for the artificial appearance of many stills, which rather suggest the semi-circular grouping at the final curtain of an old-fashioned play. If the still-man had a little time to spare—say a few minutes while the director and cameraman are conferring on the next camera-set-up—he could devise a grouping which would give an air of “naturalness” and yet preserve proportion; most of our still-men are competent to do that if they were given a chance.

We may divide stills roughly into two main classes—“action” stills (which sounds like a contradiction in terms) and “suspense” stills. The former should be posed to suggest action, or, if practicable, taken instantaneously during action itself. The other type, taken while all the characters are at rest, must appeal to the imagination in some other way, or they become merely full-length portrait groups—as, in effect, the vast majority of British stills are.





PLATE III



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British action stills, when posed, are usually absurdly stiff and unnatural—owing partly to the fact that the still-man lacks the authority to make the players pose properly when they don't feel like it; and very often they don't know the way.

The ideal will be attained when the Kinist, knowing which of his scenes have the best still-possibilities, will make due allowance for them in his shooting-script, and the still-man will be warned to attend when such scenes are to be shot, dividing the rest of his time between portraiture and the dark-room.

Lately in London there was held an exhibition of over 600 British stills. These were drawn from fifty-two productions and thirteen companies, and the collection, while far from exhaustive, was fairly representative.

My diligent search there for action-stills, however, was rewarded with a total of two—and only one of these (Fred Daniels's study of Tom Walls in British & Dominions' *A Night Like This*,) was posed.

The other, reproduced opposite, is a photo actually taken on board a windjammer rounding the Horn for the British International film *Windjammer*. A seaman was furling a sail when a footrope broke, and the still-man (who was also director and cameraman, his colleague having been washed overboard) snapped him.

His desperate involuntary attitude symbolises the struggle of man against Nature, and exactly expresses the character of the film—so exactly that it should have been of enormous publicity value to the sponsors of the film, whereas I have never seen it reproduced anywhere.

This particular still was a matter of chance, and very exceptional; but it is quite possible, and should be the practice, to simulate action.

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Unfortunately, there are two obstacles to the "snapping" of scenes during production in the studio, one being the click of the camera-shutter which is apt to be picked up by the microphone, and the other the formidable array of cameras, lamps, microphone-booms, monitor-booths, chairs, make-up tables, and other impedimenta round the set, which prevent the still-man obtaining an advantageous position. He is usually the last person to be considered, and until his importance is realised we shall not have the right stills.

We have on our studio-staff some brilliant still-cameramen, who are capable of work of the very highest quality, both scenic and portrait. Fred Daniels of British & Dominions, Cyril Stanborough of Twickenham, Fred Carter of Gainsborough, Ronnie Pilgrim of Warners—these have given in their work ample proof of the value of giving the still-man a chance.

Most of the others (several quite as competent) are being crushed by neglect and mismanagement, and have become almost reconciled to seeing the British Press full of high-class American stills which could be equalled in our own studios.

We should exploit our still-photography; it is a department in which we could lead the world, instead of limping behind.

## CHAPTER XI

### SOUND—AND SENSE

I WOULD propound an axiom—that there is no sense in the use of sound for sound's sake.

As it was sufficient at first for pictures merely to move, so it was enough for talkies merely to talk; the "novelty value" was in itself "sure-fire box-office".

It was rashly assumed, however, that the new kind of film—the kind in which a number of characters sat about and conversed—would now be able to take the place of the "action picture". This talkie business was expensive, anyway; you had to have trained actors who could speak lines, new technical experts, and a whole heap of new and costly apparatus; the "drawing-room" type of picture would at least save on production outlay—the building of many sets, and so on.

Unfortunately such a reactionary view always excludes the possibility of some progressive person "taking a gamble" by combining the advantages of the old and new systems. Rashly extravagant, yes—but such enterprise nearly always pays handsomely.

The microphone moved feebly, uncertainly, following the players up and down the room, into the next room, even (oh moment of triumph!) downstairs. This was the limit; beyond this the technique of talkies could not go.

Then like a blessed cleansing wind from the prairies came *In Old Arizona*, the first attempt at an all-outdoor

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talkie. The Fox Company, in this single picture, opened up enormous new vistas of possibility, and took the longest stride forward since Warner Bros. launched the talkie itself. It was proved that a multiplicity of stationary microphones, cunningly placed about, would solve a problem not soluble by clumsy attempts to pursue a moving object with the "mike".

True, the sound was crude. I particularly remember a shot of a frying-pan of bacon-and-eggs which sounded like a flight of aeroplanes bombing Niagara Falls; but the principle was established and the talkies were unbound.

Yet what use are they making of their new-found liberty?

The sound-picture which has the unrestrained action of a good silent film is still so rare as to be remarkable. The purely dialogue film, or at any rate the film containing long purely dialogue scenes, seems always with us.

But I believe it will pass, for it is based on a fallacious idea—the idea that a stage-play's strength lies in the *fact* of its dialogue, whereas it is the *quality* of the dialogue which counts.

One of the initial handicaps under which the stage-play labours is the necessity for so much talk. Speech, reinforced of course by subtlety of intonation, facial expression, and gesture, is the only method by which characters in a stage-play can interchange ideas.

Supposing (to take a very rough-and-ready example) one of the characters in a play wishes to indicate a ladder in the stocking of another character.

She (I feel it would be a she, since the Drama is still woefully bound by convention) has no means of focussing attention on the ladder except by speech, for the size

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of the contents of the frame in which the stage picture is set cannot vary; and herein lies a fundamental advantage of the film, in which the attention of the beholder can be directed to *magnified* portions of the whole, precisely as a man with a telescope can look at a limited sector of a general view, and see it vastly magnified.

If, in the theatre proper, every member of the audience could be provided with a telescope which would be automatically directed at the ladder in the stocking at the precise moment when attention was required to be drawn to it, there would be no need for speech; the fact of the ladder would be established; but since this is impracticable, Mrs. Poltwattle must be made to say: "My God, Mrs. McGerkinshaw, look at the ladder in Mrs. Buntorpe's stocking"—or words to that effect.

Cinema has its own proper method of establishing the ladder. A quick, short shot of the two gossips' heads close together, the lips of one moving inaudibly; their eyes, in enormous close-up, looking in a single direction; this image superimposed with ghostly fingers pointing; a close-up of the stocking, showing the ladder; the face of the wearer, conscious, or unconscious, or determinedly feigning unconsciousness of her disgrace; a medley, perhaps, of actual ladders, from short step-ladders to fire-escapes (I said this was a rough-and-ready example): and finally a return to the faces of the two gossips, expressing scandalisation, gloating, commiseration—whatever the story and characterisation demand.

There, in less time than it would take your stage character to make her remark (which, having been made, has yet to be translated by the hearer into mental image) you have built up by a series of pictures a vivid concept of the whole episode; and that, I maintain, is

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the function and province of the screen—to supply pictorially, either ready-made or suggested, those images which the stage can only offer in terms of dialogue.

The use and abuse of dialogue in films is matter for discussion in a separate chapter; what concerns us at the moment is the legitimate (because advantageous) employment of sound.

We know that talkies were launched as a “stunt” by a company which foresaw therein an enormous profit at a time when that profit was most desirable; but it is fair to assume that the men who spent years—some almost a lifetime—of patient and painstaking research into the mechanics of the talking film did not regard it as a stunt. To them it represented definite progress. The screen picture was visible; it should also be audible, and thus double its appeal.

There lies the snag; its appeal to what? To our sensual appreciation? To our intelligence? To our imagination?

The inventors of the talkie were chemists, not psychologists as the showman is. They provided and have since greatly improved the mechanism. It is the responsibility of the showman—primarily our newly-evolved Kinist—to develop a most advantageous use of that mechanism.

The microphone is now mobile—therefore let it follow the characters while they go about their business; the microphone is now selective—therefore let a number of people converse simultaneously and a single voice be heard plainly through the rest; the microphone is now modulative—therefore let the volume of sound be increased or diminished for effect without obliging the players themselves to bawl or whisper.

All these things are being done, more especially in Hollywood. Yet we still have hundreds of films, and



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especially British films, in which the protagonists stand still and shout trite remarks at each other in rotation.

The essence of drama is action and swift reaction. On the stage, much of the action and reaction is, of necessity, represented verbally, but this is disadvantageous, our hearing being a less active channel of reception than our sight. It follows that speech on the films should be reduced to the minimum, leaving the eye to receive logical, and the ear sensual, impressions; a forgivable exception is such a film as the German *Avalanche* (originally *Storm Over Mont Blanc*) in which dialogue is employed only when the use of a few words will obviate the necessity of many explanatory scenes. But better still would be the use of dialogue only when it could run concurrently with the action.

For instance, supposing a man and a girl are packing hastily to elope together; it may heighten the drama if while they pack they speak in low tones, jerkily and nervously, about their journey; but it will inevitably drag the development of the plot to a standstill if they pack first, and *then* begin their conversation, or pause in their packing to talk.

This heightening of the dramatic values by rapid speech is well exemplified in the American film *This Mad World*; a party of German soldiers, running from their bivouac to look up at a passing aeroplane, talk rapidly about it, as people will when excited.

They converse in German, and since we, as a nation, are not linguistic we do not understand what they say; but we have no need to. Their reactions have been pre-established in an earlier scene; the speech merely lends conviction to the visual narrative.

That this principle has been grasped on the Continent

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is evident in varying degrees in such films as René Clair's brilliant *Sous Les Toits de Paris* and (more particularly) *A Nous la Liberté*, and the Nero film *Kameradschaft*, in none of which is any English spoken (though the clumsy subterfuge of superimposed sub-titles is occasionally resorted to): the least perspicacious member of the audience can follow the film with ease, and the action is hardly ever delayed by the necessity for standing about and talking.

So much for the use of direct speech. What of other sound?

We are nearly all familiar by this time with the various "background noises" that are used in talkies, and which (though I be accused of heresy) were almost equally well supplied by an accomplished "effects man" as accompaniment to a silent film—the sound of gunfire, of thunder, of a train, of waves, the cheers of a crowd, horses galloping, birds singing, a guitar played in the distance.

These, like audible but indistinguishable dialogue, are all calculated to heighten the illusion—not to advance the narrative; and in all this there is little or no progress from the days of silent films, for the swish of peas in a tilted tray sounds as much like the sea when done in the orchestra-pit as when done on the side of the set—indeed, probably more when the microphone has finished with the latter offering—and two or more half-coconut-shells, if clattered skilfully on a properly prepared surface, sound as much like horses' hooves from the orchestra-pit as from the screen.

Of course, it may be said that the "canned" type of effects has a dual advantage in being perfectly synchronised (which proud claim is too frequently unsub-



PLATE IV.

HOLDING TOM WAITS IN THE BRITISH AND DOMINIONS  
PICTURE "A NIGHT LIKE THIS." (See p. 101.)



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stantiated) and in being invariable whether the film is shown at the Empire, Leicester Square, or at the Drill-hall, Little Puddington. This latter claim, also, is unsound, since the effect varies widely with the acoustics of the hall.

No, such use of sound could not alone justify the enormous expenditure occasioned by the abandonment of the silent film. Sound must be made to participate in the unfolding of the narrative, the development of the plot; and one of the chief justifications of sound, paradoxically, lies in its enhancement of silence by contrast.

The value of silence has not been properly appreciated by film-producers. Great dramatists employ it—therein lies the secret of their greatness; they realise that at peaks of human tragedy or comedy we do not gabble or prattle. We are silent. The occasion is greater than speech, outside the province of words. The originators of the Two Minutes' Silence on Armistice Day realised that; but the film-producer has yet to grasp it.

"Look!" he exclaims, pointing to the scenario. "We haven't any sound provided for this scene! How about a few bars of music here, to fill in—or the sound of traffic under the window, if you like."

To fill in! To clutter up! To pack with extraneous elements a scene that should have been rarefied almost to vacuum, as a raw housemaid insists on putting two of the vases from the spare room beside that single candlestick which the mistress has placed on the tallboy—because it looks so bare!

There was an excuse three years ago for not leaving any silences; whenever the intentional sound stopped, the unintentional sound began—a hideous rasping roar from the horn that would have immediately shattered

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any illusion. Nowadays when the voices and music and machine-guns and police-sirens and thunder and aeroplanes stop, there is, except for the rustling of tinfoil and the comments of the audience, a kind of silence . . . at any rate sufficient to provide a contrast.

You have heard from the screen the shrill tearing scream of an aeroplane diving to its doom; the scream lasts until the second of impact, and then . . . silence, complete and awe-inspiring, unless and until the roar of petrol flames breaks out.

If we could have, after a human catastrophe—say the sudden shattering of a romance—such a moment of silence, the effect would be just as terrific. Yet we are given screams, sobs, moans, music—anything but a horrified, sympathetic standing-still of the whole universe.

The provision of such silences is a potent weapon in the hands of the dramatist, and of the stage actor, part of whose difficult art lies in knowing exactly how long a silence—a pause—should last, and giving it its exact dramatic due.

The Kinist, who is to take the place of both dramatist and actor (at least in this matter) must learn the value of silence, lest the talkie, so rich in sound, perish from a surfeit of its own wealth.

## CHAPTER XII

### THE TALK IN "TALKIE"

I LOVE good dialogue. I love writing dialogue. Writing film-dialogue is well-paid work. I love being well paid.

Bearing these things in mind, you will at least allow me the virtue of sincerity when I declare that dialogue, in the accepted stage sense, has no place on, or from, or through the screen.

The stage-play, as I have tried to indicate, uses dialogue as the most expedient and practical method of expression and narration; and in the course of centuries there has been evolved for stage use a quality of dialogue admirably suited to this purpose.

It is terse, witty, and vivid; it is economical without being austere, imaginative without being flowery, realistic without being hackneyed. It is cognate with our daily speech, yet it differs materially from it. Since I am postulating the essence of drama to be action and swift reaction, it is essentially dramatic.

A good stage-play has this good dialogue, which is bred out of Characterisation by Plot, carefully nurtured by the playwright, jealously guarded by the producer, tenderly handled by the players who are to speak it. It is one of the corner-stones of Drama; it can save a poor play, mar a good one; if a line is to be altered, everyone is consulted—the player, the producer, the stage-

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manager, even (oh, astonishment!) the author. The man who can write good dialogue (and can convince an influential manager of the fact) may "eat reg'lar".

Thus dialogue in the Theatre; but what shrift has it had in Filmland? A short one indeed.

So far from admitting its importance, the producer has treated it with contempt. He has employed it, certainly—far too much of it, and of a totally wrong kind. He has taken dialogue into the studio, and left the expert dialoguist outside. He has banked on talk to sell his talkie, and provided a lamentable fustian that could not further his ends an inch.

Being neither perceptive nor discriminating, he did not realise the nature of this dialogue which had been in vogue on the stage for some hundreds of years; he mistook it for the ordinary conversation of every day, and *put the latter* in his film; and whereas he needed infinitely less dialogue than is contained in a good play, he used proportionately much more.

That is to say, when he *did* stand his people in a clump and make them talk, they talked about nothing for long spells; there is in the Theatre a tradition known as "the three-line limit" for each speech; and although it would be almost impossible to adhere absolutely to this ideal, when a character does exceed it every word must be designed to further the "action"—i.e. the development of the plot—either explicitly or through characterisation.

The film-producer, however, (perhaps with an eye to realism) sets himself no such limits. He just lets his characters talk—great long chunks of lifeless verbiage, strung together in platitudinous remark and stale, hackneyed reply, dialogue that frequently becomes monologue when the camera concentrates on the speaker.



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How many films do you see in which the heroine does not say: "But I don't understand!" Watch for this stock phrase; its recurrence becomes ludicrous after a while. We may talk as stupidly as that in real life, but we don't want it thrown back in our teeth.

This realism business has been tried in the theatre, but has only succeeded in boring the audience. We hear quite enough inane conversation every day of our lives without paying our hard-earned two-and-fourpences to hear it from the screen as well.

The Americans have an advantage over us in the matter of speech, for theirs is crisp, racy, and continually changing in metaphor; it is apt to be an entertainment in itself. Our phraseology is more conservative, and carries comparatively little novelty value.

One of the main functions of drama—including screen drama—is to reflect life in the most vivid, clear-cut manner. For most of us life is not clear-cut; it is a thing of blurred edges, of actions whose peculiar reactions are distant and not apparently connected. It is the function of drama to collect and correlate these actions and reactions so that we see them as a tangible and logical whole.

One of the most essentially dramatic of our everyday institutions is a Court of Law.

Recently my business took me into the Central Law Courts in the Strand while a case was in progress. It was a dramatic one—or at least it contained the elements of drama; and to give learned Counsel their due, they understood the value of drama, and attempted to employ it; but dialogue—in the person of a verbose judge—ruined their play.

A reluctant witness would inadvertently make an

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admission, and down would swoop Counsel like a vulture on his prey.

"You say that up to five o'clock in the evening of the 15th you had not left the house? Then how do you explain——"

But m'lud was deaf; and m'lud was patriotically continuing to serve his country after passing the peak of his intellectual power; and m'lud insisted on writing down every scrap of evidence in longhand, and explaining each time exactly why he did so.

"Very well, pray proceed, Mr. Vellum."

But the winged moment had flown; the surprise element was lost; the drama sagged like a broken bedstead.

In a well-made film, there would have been swift rapier-like play of question and answer; courteous exchanges, masking deadly rivalry, between Counsel; and above all, the Judge, hawk-eyed, intent, holding the scales of justice exactly in front of the camera-lens.

And there would certainly have been no long-winded rambling dissertation from the Bench—unless it were used as an unconsciously ironic background for a passage of silent drama in the court.

No, it is no use giving us life as it really is; and that includes speech as it really is. Indeed, all kinds of liberties can be taken with speech in Cinema. It was used with great effect, for example, in Alfred Hitchcock's film *Murder*, in which, while Herbert Marshall was shaving, his mind ran over the circumstances of the trial at which he had been juror, and his thoughts were audible, although his lips did not move.

A similar use of speech occurred in that sparkling British film *Service for Ladies*. In a Continental sleeping-coach are Elizabeth Allan and Leslie Howard, who have

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just met, and Morton Selten, as her father. They are asleep and their thoughts run in the rhythm of the train. Accompanying a close-up of the girl are the words, in her voice: "I like him a lot, I like him a lot, I like him a lot . . ." The words expressing the young man's thoughts are: "Oh, isn't she sweet! Oh, isn't she sweet! Oh, isn't she sweet! . . ." while the old gentleman's thoughts run: "Forgotten me pills, forgotten me pills, forgotten me pills . . ."

That passage of dialogue serves three useful purposes. It advances the story by showing the young people's attitude to each other; it accentuates the speed of the train; and it provides a flash of humour in the contrast between the young people's interest in each other and the old boy's interest in himself.

More recently the same director, Alexander Korda, showed in *Wedding Rehearsal* shots of printing-presses turning out a special edition, with the roar of the machinery resolving itself into myriad voices rhythmically muttering the headlines.

This is an interesting and legitimate use of speech; and it was the more surprising to find, in the same film, the long-discredited practice of including passages of dialogue in which half the wittiest lines were lost in the audience's laughter at the preceding ones.

Rather late in the day certain Hollywood producers have paid fabulous sums to well-known dramatists to journey thither and write stories and dialogue; but this is rather in the nature of a gesture, or a counter-move to a similar action on the part of a rival company; there seldom appears in the films thus produced any glimpse of the brilliance that made those playwrights famous—partly because they are working under unfamiliar con-

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ditions; partly because they have trained themselves to use dialogue as a primary factor, not as an auxiliary: and partly because the director has *carte blanche* to throw the dialogue thus written to the winds and write some more himself, or get the gag-man to write it.

The Kinist, of course, will be a man large enough to accept the assistance of experts. In preparing his script he will, I believe, rough-in dialogue where it is essential, and seek the aid of a trained dialogist in perfecting it; this dialogist may happen to be a well-known stage playwright, but he will keep these compartments water-tight. While he is writing film-dialogue he will be careful to "cut the cackle" and let the Kinist "come to the 'osses", for on the screen it is the 'osses that make the show go round.

## CHAPTER XIII

### THE SAVAGE BREAST

WHEN we sat in a one-and-threepenny plush tip-up in the dear distant days of silent films, we expected music with our screen entertainment—and got it. That is, we got *something*. . . .

But whether it was provided by a thirty-six piece symphony orchestra or an adenoidal maiden in steel-rimmed glasses at an asthmatic upright grand, we recognised and demanded music as part of the show. Anyone who has ever seen a silent picture through without this boon will realise how indispensable music was.

At appropriate moments in the more resourceful cinemas the sound of a door-knocker or a railway-train (*shoosh-shoosh, shoosh-shoosh*) would sound from the orchestra-pit; but the music was the thing—*staccato* for the ride of the cowboys, *adagio* for the stroll of the lovers through the cherry-orchard, *crescendo* for the storm on the mountain-top, *pianissimo* for the sleeping children.

It was not merely an expedient for drowning the whirr of the projector and the chatter of the spectators; it was a calculated appeal to our sensual appreciation, as the pictures on the screen appealed to our reason.

The first talkies, of course, had to be “all-singles” in order to exploit to the full the new invention; the “back-stage” subject in particular gave a legitimate excuse for the introduction of singing and dancing.

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Then the screen borrowed a convention from the stage and began to indulge in sheer musical comedy; but even here—for instance in *No No Nanette*—there was an attempt to provide a reasonable excuse for characters singing and dancing, which seemed to imply recognition of some rule of logic.

This rule, however, was flaunted in the most flagrantly operatic manner in films such as *The Rogue Song*, in which Lawrence Tibbett, patently brought to the screen for his magnificent voice, burst into song while being flogged in a Caucasian mountain fastness—to the accompaniment of a full but invisible orchestra!

This wildly improbable situation brings us to the question whether films are to be convincing or, like the Scotswoman of the story, “jist no’ bother”; and it seems advisable to draw a rough general distinction between films which make their major appeal to our reason and films which appeal more especially to our senses.

A production which relies for its interest *chiefly* on the story, the development of the plot, the juxtaposition and correlation of Cause and Effect, the delineation of character, falls in the former class; the production which exists primarily for the exploitation of virtuosity, or to make us laugh, goes into the latter category.

It is fair, I think, to assume that the former type of film demands conviction; and there is nothing more shattering to conviction than the sudden interpolation of music where no music could possibly be.

Watching a silent film, our minds accept its essential silence and the emanation of music from the orchestra-pit—even though the acceptance be subconscious; but in watching a talkie, we do not envisage the mammoth horn behind the porous screen; we accept the speech





PLATE V.

LAWRENCE TIBBET . . . BURST INTO SONG WHILE BEING FLOGGED."

(See p. 118.)



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as proceeding from the mouths of the characters, the *bonk-bonk* as being caused by the visible squeezing of the motor-horn.

We are, in fact, attuned to a logical sequence of cause and effect; and as we know there can be no music without instruments and players, we are not prepared to accept music where we know no instruments or players could possibly be. Our mood of acceptance is abused; our credulity is outraged; our pursuance of the theme is interrupted; the spell is broken.

Music is, and very rightly, so much a part of our daily life that it can fairly claim a place in our films; but this very universality renders it more possible to enlist the assistance of music without straining the probabilities. A soldier and his lass can legitimately take their farewell to the sound of a military band outside. The hurdy-gurdy on the corner provides a logical accompaniment to a Cockney drama; a piano played in the next room, the twang of a banjo, the croon of a ukulele, the plaintive murmur of a steel guitar—any of these can enormously enhance the effect of a love-scene; while nowadays it is only necessary for one of the characters to turn the knob of a wireless-set to release a flood of music of any kind or volume. (The particular kind required seems to be always on tap, whereas when *I* wish to listen to melody I always get either jazz or a talk on frogs; but let that pass.)

Whenever I read the dread credit-title “musical score arr. by So-and-So”, I am filled with premonitions of inexplicable strains breaking into my enjoyment of and interest in the play, like the “soft music over battlefield” of our callow melodrama days.

I would here make an honourable exception in such a

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case as the scene in *Avalanche* wherein the radio-set in the almost-wrecked alpine cabin is giving forth organ-music, which gradually blends with the wild thunder of the storm and becomes a mighty diapason, raising us to sublime heights of exaltation.

If excuse for this were needed, it would be found in the presence in the hut of the mountaineer, helpless and semi-conscious, to whose numbed brain the wild periods of the tempest might well seem transmuted to music; but the mood thus gradually engendered sets us above whys and wherefores. We are at one with the storm, whatever sound it assumes.

However, this happens about once in a year of film-going. Usually the illogical interpolation of musical accompaniment is merely a transparent attempt to fill-in gaps in the dialogue and induce a mood which the development of the plot is not powerful enough (that is, skilfully-enough written) to bring about; and it defeats its own ends.

I would oblige all producers to see a brilliant American burlesque film called *A Hollywood Theme-song*, in which the soldier-hero, going to the war, breaks into song on every occasion, in and out of season, and the camera switches each time to a determined little orchestra of three who attend the hero, even into the trenches. The sponsors of *The Rogue Song* should have seen this in time.

Our other class of film, appealing purely to the senses, *provided it establishes itself early as such*, may be as fantastic as it likes within the bounds of homogeneity. That is to say, if it is to be an extravaganza in which people break into song and dance with no regard for time and place, they must start doing it early in the film, not halfway through. The production which cannot

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make up its mind whether to be straight comedy or musical comedy, burlesque or extravaganza, melodrama or farce, deserves the fate of that ephemeral hybrid the "part-talkie", in which the characters, after mouthing their words silently, suddenly broke into harsh speech, to fall mercifully silent again a sequence or two later.

I would emphasise above all the importance of establishing a mood. *Sunshine Susie* opened with the heroine's arrival by train, and no sooner was she outside the station than she sat down on her suitcase and sang a song about herself. This attuned our mood to extravaganza. After this, any character might sing or dance at any time, and we accepted it as proper and rational; but if one of the characters had committed a murder, or turned into a white rabbit, our susceptibilities would have been outraged, because we had not engaged to admit such a possibility. Fantasy, to be acceptable, must keep within sight of the ground—the firm ground from which it took off.

I do *not* mean, however, that a grave or gay mood must be maintained—merely a mood of expectation or acceptance; some of the greatest moments in film drama (notably in the Chaplin comedies) have lain in a trembling hesitancy between laughter and tears.

And no aid is more potent than music in effecting quick changes of emotion; who could be merry to the haunting nostalgia of "The Londonderry Air"?—or who sad to the pompous strut of "The March of the Wooden Soldiers"?

We are fortunate in our resources, for some of our most brilliant instrumentalists and composers are at the service of our studios; but occasionally we suffer from the ministrations of a musical director whose conception

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of musical values is fallacious—who imagines, for instance, that jazz expresses human happiness, whereas it embodies the hectic restlessness and desperate gaiety of unbalanced youth; such a bungler can ruin a film as surely as can an unskilful cameraman.

I have not touched on the films designed purely to exploit bands and performers, but when, as in British & Dominions' *Blue Danube*, embodying Alfredo Rode's Tzigane Band, or *Say It With Music*, written round Jack Payne's orchestra, a dramatic story is used as a setting, they come automatically into the "straight" class and must conform to its rules.

Let us by all means have music from the screen; but let us not allow our Feast of Reason to become mixed with our Flow of Soul, lest it cause one of them to go down the wrong way.

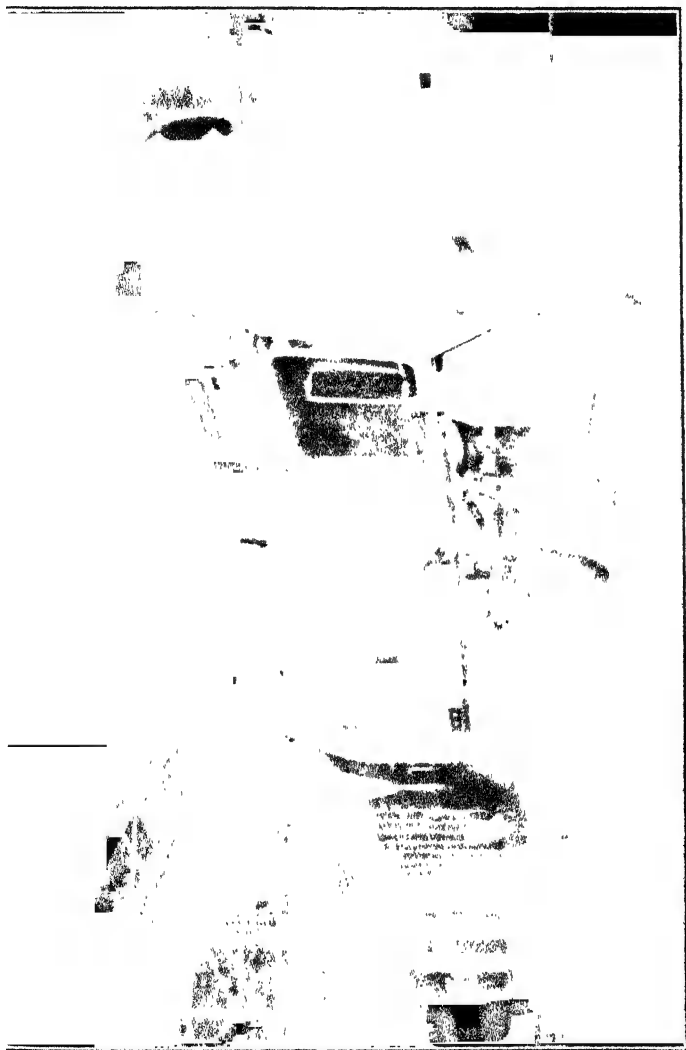


PLATE VI.

"SEE *THAT* ON THE SCREEN AND MARVEL." A COMPLETE FRENCH RAILWAY-  
STATION SET CONSTRUCTED IN THE SHEPHERD'S BUSH STUDIO FOR GAUMONT'S  
"ROME EXPRESS." (See p. 130.)



## CHAPTER XIV

### THIS "ART"

THE muddled thinking prevalent in the film world is exemplified by the use of the word "art" when "artifice" is intended.

Thus the department which is entrusted with the planning and building of sets is known as the "art-department"; just why, no one seems to know. Perhaps because, twenty years ago, the background was still a painted backcloth, and a picture painted on canvas has always been "art".

Now it might more reasonably be called the architecture department, since sets have so increased in solidity and practicability as at last to border on permanence. In fact, some companies keep a semi-permanent set (usually out on "the lot", or land adjoining the studio) where it is only necessary to make slight alterations for successive films. The "street set" at Welwyn, with its concrete roadway and pavements, is one example of this, and the "village" on the B.I.P. lot at Elstree is another.

Twenty years ago it was the business of the director, in filming an interior scene, to set up his camera and shoot his subject on a stage formed by the angle of two "flats"—pieces of painted scenery, or wall-papered scenery, furnished with doors and windows.

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But since the camera took unto itself wheels and apparently wings, this will no longer do. Sets must be so devised that the camera may whizz round and shoot in the opposite direction without detecting any "rough edges"; may climb upstairs, and go to the window, and look down into the street, and even into the house opposite, and remain convinced.

Thus has been evolved the honeycomb set, which is practically a suite of rooms or even a whole house; and you may imagine the ingenuity required to build this in such a manner that every corner of it is capable of being lighted *from above* with the ponderous apparatus at present in vogue.

Ingenuity—but not art. Art has been reasonably defined as "the manifestation of the Spiritual by means of the Material", and the set-designing and building department does not do this. It manifests the material by reproducing it.

I am not trying to split hairs in thus objecting to a label; I want the *art* of Cinema to be restricted to as few people as possible, and it is in constant danger of being dispersed among many.

The Russian master Pudovkin declares that "the smaller the number of persons directly taking part in the making of a film, the more disjointed is their activity and the worse is the finished product of the work." His political creed of course obliges him to this—to a communal craftsmanship. I am all for that; the administrative and productive sides of a film business, and their various subdivisions, must work in close co-operation, as do the sections and departments of any successful business. But I insist that the Kinist, who will prepare the scenario, direct the film, and supervise the (purely



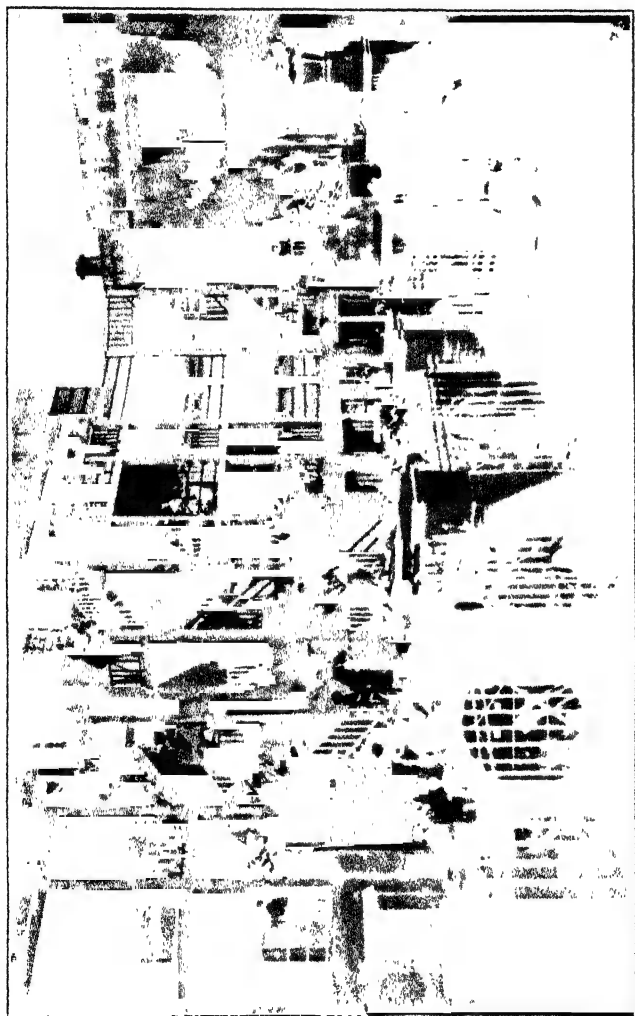


PLATE VII.

"SETS ARE SO DEVISED THAT THE CAMERA MAY GO INTO THE STREET AND  
REMAIN CONVINCED." A HUGE TENEMENT SET BUILT AT FAIRFAX FOR A.R.P.'S  
"LOOKING ON THE BRIGHT SIDE."



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mechanical) editing, *must be the only creative artist in the studios.*

The Kinist has not yet arrived; meanwhile, the creative artists are four—the scenarist, the director, the actor, and the editor. Three too many; and shall we add the designer and builder of sets to this already congested company? And if we admit him, how can we exclude the cameraman, the costume-designer, the make-up man, the musical director? Why, even the little three-days-work-a-year crowd-girl is by courtesy termed an “artiste”!

These are probably all capable of being creative artists if they were given a free hand and an unfettered imagination, and what a glorious chaos would then ensue!—precisely as if each player in an orchestra played as he thought best. It would almost be worth trying, in order to see the resultant film—if it ever came to the screen.

But all these artists have bound themselves to the service of Cinema, and must become, not artists, but craftsmen. The architect who is in charge of the art-department may be capable of planning the most glorious castle ever known; but if the Kinist—or, at present, the scenarist-cum-director wants quite an ordinary little castle, an ordinary little castle must be provided.

You perceive the danger? Film-production is attracting men of great character to its service; a man of strong character asserts his personality wherever he goes; and if he once gets it into his head that creative artistry is required in the department in which he works, nothing short of annihilation will prevent his supplying it; and the film must suffer.

As a case in point, I saw some time ago in a British studio a set which had been created by the art-director.

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Created is the correct word; it was supposed to represent a room in a country house, and resembled no room in any country house that ever existed.

The art-director had merely been told to build a room in a country house, and had given his artistry full rein; possibly he was "manifesting" some obscure spiritual concept by means of the physical elements of timber, plaster, and paint. I don't know.

Anyway, there the thing stood, and most of the action had to be shot in it (it was *that* kind of film); and stuck triumphantly about it were six twisted pillars, of a type occasionally seen adorning Restoration tombs in English Cathedrals.

No camera-set-ups had been arranged until the set was built (it was *that* kind of production), and it was pitiful to watch the agony of the director and the cameraman as they strove in vain to avoid getting one or more of those pillars into each shot. In the completed film the pillars became more prominent than the players who moved about confusedly in a twisted forest.

Occasionally an inanimate object should become a feature of the film; but it should be at the bidding of the director, not at the over-bidding of the art-director.

A competent and imaginative art-director is worth his weight in banknotes to the firm fortunate enough to employ him. His very competence—at his job of producing exactly the set required—will keep his imagination in check; his imagination will the better enable him to translate into terms of laths and plaster the director's intention as expressed verbally or in sketches.

There is unlimited scope for the art-director to-day, since the principle of filmic transposition is becoming better understood. That is to say, a wide vista is now

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shot on location, and special features of it are reproduced in the studio, in or before which the action takes place.

An admirable example of this occurred in the important British silent film *Reveill  *. The director, George Pearson, wished to reproduce briefly the Armistice night rejoicings in Trafalgar Square. A less brilliant man of the Cinema would have caused a vast set to be built. Pearson took a long shot of Trafalgar Square at night while it was fairly crowded, and then caused a life-size reproduction to be made of one of Landseer's well-known stone lions, set it in the middle of the studio floor, and took from above and behind it, as though the observer were standing on the plinth of Nelson's column, a shot of soldiers and civilians dancing and surging round the lion.

The area of the shot did not extend as far as the edges of the studio floor, and one plaster lion was, in fact, the whole set. This is an application of a basic principle of true Cinema.

Such practice is of infinite value in a climate like that of our blessed isles, where it is almost impossible to organise location-work; I am entirely in favour of exploiting our unique location facilities—Britain contains, indisputably, a greater variety of scenery than any other similar area in the world—but I also believe that practically all close-ups and even a great deal of mid-length camera-work should be done in the studio.

This practice is also advantageous in producing films laid in foreign countries, since it is only necessary for one cameraman to visit the actual location, from which he brings back "long-shots" of the various scenes in which the action is laid, and numerous close-up still-photo-

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graphs of suitable settings as a guide to reproduction in the studio.

So amazingly skilful is the craftsmanship of the art-department nowadays that it is almost impossible for even the expert to decide which shots have been taken in the studio and which on location.

One intricate and valuable part of the "art-work" is the construction of objects and scenes in miniature, frequently animated, modelled exactly to scale and photographed instead of their life-size prototypes. The park which the cripple girl watches in her mirror in *The Outsider*, the iceberg tearing the bows of the liner in *Atlantic*, the submarine lying on the sea-bed in *Men Like These*, the railway-train and the ferry-steamer in *No. 17*—all were models which you could have spanned with your arms.

Two inventions, recently perfected, that have rendered first aid to the art-department are the Schufftan process and the Dunning process.

In the former, a mirror is so placed that the camera-lens is trained partly upon the set-scene and partly on a reflection in the mirror of a scale-model standing at a little distance from the camera; in the completed film the model is shown the same size as the actual scene, and attached to it.

Thus, in shooting a bridal party leaving church, for instance, it is only necessary to build the lower half of the church, and a small model of the upper half.

A "Dunning shot" is one whereby the image of the character is set in a moving background taken separately. This is especially useful for travelling exterior shots, such as that of a robbery being committed on top of a tram. The passing scenery has been actually taken, previously,

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from the top of a tram in motion, and the character is taken in the studio and blended with the background by the process of the ingenious Mr. Dunning.

If you saw *Bachelor's Baby* you will remember a shot of William Freshman tearing along a country lane on a motor-cycle with a baby on the handlebars; that shot was taken at rest in the studio, with a wind-machine blowing the rider's scarf out behind and ruffling his hair. The lane was done by Dunning.

There is also the ingenious practice of "back-projection", in which, while the action in a railway carriage reproduced in the studio is being shot, a film of the passing countryside is projected on a translucent screen behind the carriage windows; and enormous photographic enlargements, such as the alpine vista seen through the inn-windows in *Service for Ladies*, are being increasingly used as distant backgrounds in place of the old painted backcloth.

Nevertheless, plenty remains for the art-director to do, and brilliantly he does it; in this department our studios can bear comparison with any other in the world, though the intention prompting its activities is often singularly ill-advised. For instance, one of the largest and most imposing sets ever built in England was built in the open air, where it stood in the rain for days, waiting to be used. This, of course, is absurd, and defeats the purpose of "exterior" set construction, which is to render production independent of climatic and other interruptions.

An ingenious producer can employ as setting the exterior of the tallest sky-scraper in the world, without his cast ever leaving the studio.

First he obtains shots from various angles of the

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actual sky-scraper, and of the street below as seen from a window. Then he reproduces, say, two or more windows, full-size, in the studio; and the "panning" shots, up or diagonally across the face of the building, which connect the windows and establish them in our mind as being in the sky-scraper, are done with a scale model. And *oi, oi*, the saving!

A complete French railway-station set recently constructed at Shepherd's Bush for *Rome Express*, however, was built on a sound stage, occupying it entirely, and enabling the producers to defy the elements.

See *that* on the screen and marvel—at the enterprise of the producers who gambled an enormous sum on it, at the organisation of the executives who arranged for its erection, at the craft of the designers and constructors who placed it there, at the skill of the photographers who reproduced it on the screen—but at the *art* of the scenarist, the director, and the cutter who imbued it with filmic life.







PLATE VIII.

"THE SERVICES OF THE EXPERT WILL STILL BE NEEDED." ARTHUR WONER BEING TRANSFORMED INTO A SAILOR FOR A SHERLOCK HOLMES DISGUISE IN A.R.P.'S "THE SIGN OF FOUR." (See p. 131.)

## CHAPTER XV

### THE FUTURE OF MAKE-UP

ONE of the functionaries who will survive the coming change in the mechanism of film-production is the make-up man; but his function will be greatly modified.

He came in, like the actor, from the theatre proper; and he came purely for the purpose of sticking false whiskers and painting wrinkles on young men and women to make them look old.

At first each actor did this for himself, as he had always done on the stage; you will find in the theatre no special make-up man, to go round to each player's dressing-room and put on his make-up for him or her; the "pro." who could not apply his or her own make-up would be disgraced for ever.

In fact, you would find, if you took a census of British make-up men, that the majority are old actors whom the troublous seas of theatrical depression have washed high up on to the beach of unemployment, and who have made an incidental accomplishment serve them in good stead.

Twenty years ago there was no make-up in the film-studio, because there was no artificial lighting to speak of; practically everything was done by daylight, and in those days women did not enhance their complexions as they do now. A dab of rouge, a touch of powder, yes—but a woman would only assume the heavy "street make-

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up" of to-day for "the street" in its most sinister sense.

However, with the introduction of artificial lighting came the introduction of artificial complexions to withstand the fierce searching glare; but as red, when photographed, appeared black, no rouge was used; a layer of grease-paint of a uniform tint was spread over the whole face, the shade judged most "photographic" being a bilious yellow.

This held sway for some years, gradually yielding place to a flesh pink, which was, as a rule, most flattering to the wearer.

At the same time there were various tintings of the eyelids and lips, upon the exact shade and degree of which no two studios were quite agreed.

The effect of this make-up was to obliterate wrinkles and practically eliminate character, presenting a smooth, mask-like surface which was both uncomfortable to wear and unnatural in appearance on the screen.

However, the first disadvantage was discounted by the fact that most of the players had grown used to wearing a similar layer of grease (albeit variegated) for their stage work; and as to the unnatural appearance, "naturalism" was attempted by the superimposition of further make-up representing wrinkles, lines, blotches, pock-marks, hair, and so on.

Then came the Max Factor make-up, which is spread in a very thin paste, allowing characteristic contours, creases, and wrinkles to show through, but concealing imperfections of skin texture and complexion.

One great advantage of this preparation is that, being absorbent, it neutralises the perspiration which becomes inevitable in the confines of the almost hermetically-sealed sound-stage.

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Now the wide use of panchromatic film-stock (a preparation of the actual celluloid whereby colours are given their essential difference, though not reproduced), is logically accompanied by a make-up which approximates that used on the stage, with appropriate colouring on lips and cheeks, but naturally less crudely applied, since it is to be viewed (by the camera) from a few feet away instead of (by the audience) from many yards.

This has necessitated the services of a brand-new type of make-up man—an expert who paints with fine brushes and achieves results bearing the closest inspection; indeed, I am sometimes hard put to it in a studio to decide whether a girl is wearing film or street make-up.

But hand-in-hand with this “natural” make-up comes the equally natural phenomenon of no make-up at all.

The Russians, in their post-war period of forced un-production, experimented with this, and discovered amazing glimpses of spiritual beauty in both men and women beside which the doll-faced heroines of Hollywood paled into insignificance. The Germans have even improved on this—perhaps partly because the “types” they selected were more to our Anglo-Saxon taste. The French (notably in *The Passion of Joan of Arc*) have tried it with success; and the American and British cameramen have progressed as far as occasionally to photograph the small-part and “character” players *au naturel*.

I look forward to a time when even the heroine will go before the camera with considerably less disguise than she wears in the street, so that we shall be able, in fact, to see what she is like; and I believe she will be cast because she looks the part, not engaged to play the part and then made up to look like it.

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But this development will not throw the genuine make-up man out of employment, though it will release from duty the mere plasterer who is capable only of smoothly coating the faces of extras with grease-paint. The services of the expert will still be needed in the case of films in which the story covers a long period of time, in which one or more of the characters have to grow old; or to furnish a character with any special scar or other physical peculiarity; or to furnish the material for a "trick" shot such as that in *Downhill*, in which a girl, looking at a handsome young roué, suddenly sees him as he is by nature and will be physically in a few years.

There will always be, too, work of the special kind necessitated for *The Sign of Four*, in which a character had to be painted from head to foot with designs to represent tattoo-marks; this would be quite outside the scope of the ordinary make-up man.

As in almost every other technical branch of the industry, a host of inexperts will leave the field clear to the few experts; and this is an aspect of our modern life which is by no means confined to Filmland.

## CHAPTER XVI

### FINE FEATHERS

ONE by one the ancient causes for the reproaches levelled at British films are being removed, but among the last departments to vindicate themselves is, strangely, the Dress Department.

Certainly this is strange, for as a nation we long since ceased to have the finger of scorn pointed at us as possessing the World's Worst-dressed Women. In fact, we have swung a good distance towards the other extreme. But if the grim truth must be told about our film heroines, they are all-too-frequently dowdy.

This is disgraceful; and it behoves us to inquire into the cause—which, as usual, lies in failure on behalf of producers to grasp elementary principles.

To begin with, who is responsible for the clothes worn by our screen women?—for their design, colour, material, and cut?

The answer is, no one; that is to say, no single person.

Some of the larger British studios have their own resident dress-designer, but more frequently the matter is left to chance and to the conflicting ministrations of the contracting firm, the player herself, the director, the cameraman, an executive or two, the wardrobe-mistress, and anyone else who cares to offer expert advice.

In America the job of studio dress-designer is a highly-specialised one. The responsible person *learns* her job

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(*her* job, be it noted, for in America they have awakened to the fact that in making films for women it is not altogether stupid to enlist the services of women); and this job differs materially from that of ordinary lay dress-designing.

In the first place, the prospective wearer of a gown must be studied, not merely from the point of view of what will become her, but with an eye to the director's intention. An actress may look like a deliberate breaker of hearts and wrecker of homes, and ordinarily the dress-designer's fingers would itch to dress her in such a way as subtly to express this characteristic; but if a fool-director has cast her as a heroine, her dress must contribute to her appearance whatever it may of womanliness, of charm, of purity, of modesty.

It is possible to achieve a simplicity that does not suggest the product of a Wednesday meeting of the local Dorcas Society. Of course it costs a lot of money; but British studios waste so much in other directions that it would be an economy by comparison.

*After* suitability should come cost. The fact that cost is usually considered first is merely evidence of another misapprehension on the part of the producer; certainly one should cut one's coat according to one's cloth, but if there is not enough cloth to make a coat, don't make it. In other words, the producer who rushes into production without sufficient working capital to provide proper dress for his characters is doing a disservice to British films as well as to himself.

Where the expert dress-designer can score in the matter of cost is in her knowledge of photographic values. She knows, for instance, the relative "filmability" of various types of artificial silk, which will be indistin-



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guishable on the screen from real silk and hang as well. She has a scientific knowledge, too, of the endurance qualities of various fabrics under the fierce lights of the studio, and would not use, for instance, fine lace or silk organdie, which might perish before the picture were completed.

However trained or instinctive is her eye for colour, it will be useless unless she can see colours as the camera-lens does. Since the introduction of panchromatic film-stock, the selection of colours has become complicated, for whereas originally red became black, and blue white, and green a silver-grey, now there is a subtle gradation of shades which gives unlimited scope for effect.

Only by continual experience and experiment can the exact photographic value of each shade be determined and its screen-effect anticipated. Of course, you need not fear a "clash" of colours as you might on the stage; but you have colours that look "live" in the studio and "dead" on the screen, and *vice versa*; and it is not merely desirable but necessary to know which is which. I have seen a leading player's screen personality murdered in cold blood by a gown that had looked ravishing when I saw it in the studio; it was merely the wrong shade, but it killed her big scene.

Among the dozens of British film dress-designers I only know of one, Mrs. Scott-Akroyd, who has herself conducted experiments to determine the photographic value of the various shades and textures she employs. The majority of studios rely on leading West End houses, hoping their names will provide good publicity value.

Next in importance to photographic value, and its relation to cost, is the question of fashion.

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Hollywood scores heavily in this respect, for her dress-experts have their fingers perpetually on the pulse of Paris, and know, with uncanny foresight, what will be worn at the time the picture is shown; in England, with our unfortunate system of allowing months to elapse between preview and release, a style that was pure Paris when the picture was made becomes pure Puddletown by the time it reaches the suburbs and provinces.

An amusing example of this occurred when a racing picture was made in 1931.

It was during the deservedly brief reign of the hideous little black quasi-bowler for women, and no one had thought of warning the extras not to wear them. Consequence—a paddock full of bowlers, which, when the film was released, possessed only an antiquarian interest.

This, of course, was merely due to faulty supervision; but I have known mistakes just as glaring to be made, with deliberation and expense, in the case of principals.

Some time ago, before the general use of panchromatic film, an experimental studio-set of black, white, and various shades of grey was used to test the possibility of entirely dispensing with colour.

Photographically, it worked; but the psychological effect on the director and players was so depressing that all scenes shot in this setting were as heavy as lead, and had to be remade.

This suggests another consideration to the dress-designer—is the wearer “happy” in it? Does it assist her to convey the desired mood? If you bear in mind the probability that screen-acting will yield place eventually to screen-looking-and-being, this question becomes an even more important one.

With all these considerations, is it surprising that the

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average production falls to the ground in the matter of dress? This is a common procedure:

Supposing, as frequently happens, a picture containing garden-party sequences is being produced in December. The principals, cast at the last possible moment, are sent rushing off to a more-or-less fashionable modiste, who has not, of course, any summer frocks in stock. She will, however, run some up—at great inconvenience, purely to oblige, and for a heavy consideration; and very run-up they look, too.

That women filmgoers are deeply interested in clothes on the screen is indicated by the success of a Fox film made a year or two ago, *Clothes and the Woman*, which in America was called *On Your Back*—the idea being that a woman should put much of her capital “on her back”, lovely clothes being a valuable asset to any woman.

Although there was a mother-love story as a framework, or clothes-horse, the chief interest of the picture lay in clothes; but the subject was exploited in such a way as to give it an acute interest. Even an incidental mannequin parade contained part of the development of the plot, and by skilful cutting and dialogue was made vital.

There would have been two ways of mishandling this sequence; either by making it absurdly spectacular, as was done in a recent Joan Crawford story of the “flaming youth” type, when it became hokum; or by filming it merely as a display of the latest fashions, as was done more recently in a British production, when it became boring.

Dress must become, or appear, as subservient to the proper development of the story as must the set-building, the make-up, and the lighting; and the dress-

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department must realise this condition, and be properly equipped to comply with it.

There is an ideal for this department, as for every department, and it will be reached, but I am afraid not soon.

The department will be under the immediate and sole control of a woman who has organising-ability, a sense of style, and an intimate knowledge of photographic values in form, colour, and texture; also a sense of character which will enable her to adapt a dress-conception to both the player and the part.

As soon as the Kinist has prepared his script, the dress-expert will make notes from it of the various characters and their requirements, and prepare designs, which she will submit to the Kinist. The latter, always bearing in mind that she *knows her job*, will approve, or suggest alterations; and as soon as the parts are cast the dress-expert will be able to adapt the designs to their prospective wearers.

Her expenditure upon the frocks will be determined in a budgetting conference, their colouring and when they will be required in a general production-conference, being adjusted respectively to the colour of the sets in which they will be worn, and to the production-schedule.

Then she can proceed to have frocks created which will make every woman want to see another production from the same studio. They will be ready in advance; there will be no rush, no confusion, no makeshift.

A little commonsense and practicality will have crept into that particular domain of the practical and commonsense sex—Dress; and not a moment too soon.

When we gird up our loins to combat Hollywood, we must at least see that the hang of our loincloth is correct.

## CHAPTER XVII

### SPECTACLE

I WANT to see British film-production carried out almost entirely within the confines of the studio, because only in this way can we be independent of one of our chief bugbears—the English climate.

“And how the dickens,” you quite reasonably ask, “are you going to film in your studio the horse-races, the aeroplane-races, the naval-battles, the railway-crashes, the volcanic-eruptions, the shipwrecks, the football-matches, the conflagrations, and all the gigantic manifestations of Nature and Civilisation that furnish food for films? In a word, what about Spectacle?”

I deplore that favourite trick of stump orators, of putting foolish questions into the mouths of the opposition, just for the sake of knocking them out like pipes from the mouths of so many Aunt Sallies; but I feel that this question is an intelligent one which you might be expected to ask.

The answer is that Spectacle is, or should be, (a) *incidental* to the film (b) supplied *gratis* to the intelligent producer (c) reproducible *in detail* in the studio.

To take these points in order; first, it is important to differentiate between the film which exists for spectacle alone, as *Hell's Angels* did, and the film in which spectacle is subservient and contributory to the story, as it is in *Cimarron*. The former, without the aerial battles, would

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be a wisp of a thing. *Cimarron*, shorn of its land-rush scenes, would still be a mighty record of pioneering.

Now the type of film which depends upon spectacle is a type which is passing; it has had its day, but too frequently in such films the story was swallowed up in an unwieldy production—and unless the story endure, all is lost.

But where the story calls for incidental spectacle, there must be spectacle. The film must be denied nothing which will contribute to its perfection.

The question is, are we brought appreciably nearer that perfection by the expenditure of hundreds of thousands of pounds on a mighty scene which only lasts a few minutes on the screen? I think not.

In the first place, what is it for? To give the publicity department an opportunity for ballyhoo? That particular type of "story" has grown rather stale of late. To make Bigger British Pictures? "Bigger" must not be confused with "Better"—and neither must "Costlier". To lend conviction?

This is where we come to our second point. The astute producer need hardly spend a shilling on the staging of mammoth spectacles—only on photographing them.

One of the most spectacular events I ever saw in a film was the triumphal homecoming of the rescued Antarctic explorers in *The Lost Zeppelin*.

Apparently the whole of New York was pressed into service for this film. Sky-scrapers were decorated, the streets were lined with packed rows of cheering spectators, the whole New York police-department had turned out, bands, cars, and all, and millions of fragments of paper fell in a continuous snowstorm, as is the practice when New York acclaims her heroes.

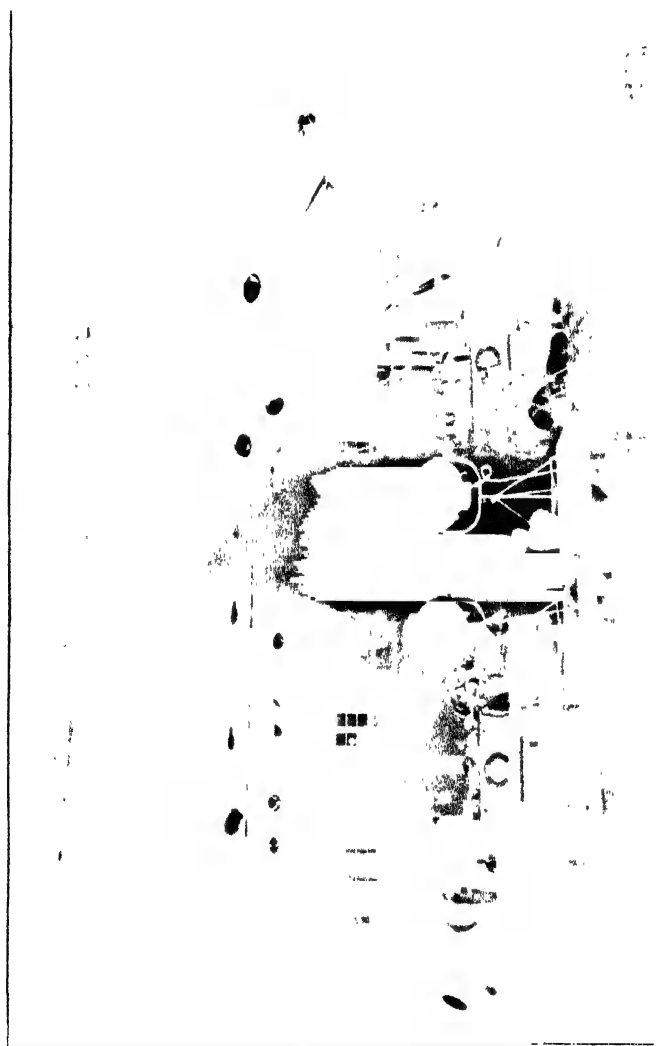


PLATE IX.

"WHERE THE STORY CALLS FOR SPECTACLE, THERE MUST BE SPECTACLE."—FILMING A FOUNTAIN SCENE IN AN M.G.M. PICTURE.





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From this amazing scene we cut to the windows of the houses, to spectators at one particular window (some of whom we already knew in the story), then back to the street scenes, then to a close-up of the hero in his car, smiling and bowing—then to another long view—then to the window.

“Stupendous!” said the audience, gazing. “That must have cost a fortune!”

But it had cost only a few dollars, for it was merely a clever use of some shots of Lindbergh’s New York reception after his Atlantic flight; the clever trick of “panning” to the crowded windows and then cutting to the characters in one particular window (built in the studio) established connection between spectacle and story; and the close-up of the hero (also taken in the studio, with a prop-man assiduously dropping paper on him from the gantry) clinched the matter.

The same principle was recently employed with excellent effect in London Film Productions’ *Wedding Rehearsal*, in which the Changing of the Guard at St. James’s Palace was so cunningly blended with shots of a studio reconstruction of part of it that it seemed as though the characters in the story were actually taking part in the ceremony.

There is no reason why almost any important event should not be used in this way. For instance, supposing the launching of a ship figures in the story; no producer would be mug enough to build and launch a ship for the occasion. He builds up a section of the bows in the studio and films the launching ceremony, then cuts immediately to a long shot of any similar ship gliding down the slipway and cleaving the water, and cuts back immediately to a close-up of the group watching it go.

## *Filmland in Ferment*

It is only necessary to give a *glimpse* of the actual spectacle, just by way of establishing its existence; the bit of it which you will have laboriously built up in the studio establishes and preserves the connection between the spectacle and your characters.

There must, however, *be* this connection. In a recent Paramount British film, *Insult*, made entirely in the studio at Elstree, we see troops leaving for a desert battle; then we cut to a succession of very long shots of desert fighting (palpably borrowed from another film—possibly *The Four Feathers*) and then back to the garrison town; one close-up of the hero fighting half-a-dozen Arabs would have been sufficient to link-up the battle with the characters; as it was, it all seemed too impersonal and far away—especially as the rest of the film was in close-ups.

Of course, when you come to historical or “period” films, you are up against something more difficult. For instance, you can’t rely upon being able to film the battle of Waterloo “on the cheap”, or bag it from a disused newsreel.

Remember, however, that we are dealing with films of which the spectacular value is *not* the be-all and end-all. So long as we establish beyond possibility of doubt the fact of the battle as a whole, we need not dwell upon it.

For instance, suppose we show the white-gaitered legs of men marching in step . . . the Union Jack . . . black-gaitered legs marching *in the opposite direction* . . . the Tricolour . . . wagon-wheels . . . Napoleon on his horse . . . muskets in line . . . the grim faces of Grenadiers . . . of Cuirassiers. . . .

These are living, moving people, and for their sake we accept the next shot, which is a model of the battlefield,

## *The Film*

with long lines of troops moving towards each other, taken as though from a far distance.

The clever cameraman achieves this effect by shutting the lens, moving the lines of troops a fraction, exposing the camera-lens again, and repeating *ad lib*—following precisely the principle of the recording of Mickey Mouse's activities. It can, in fact, even be done as the Mouse masterpieces are done, with sketches.

Then comes a shot of the British generals on a hillock (in the studio); one of these looks through a telescope at the battle, and we immediately see (through a "mask", if you like) a close-up of the hero in the thick of the battle, fighting desperately (in the studio) against fearful odds.

He is thus established in the fight, which we have accepted for the sake of the real soldiers we saw marching towards it.

It is, of course, effective to have the camera "tracking" along a trench in a film of modern warfare; but few trench scenes have been better presented than those in the British film *Suspense*, and they were done in the studio.

Even if actual work on the sound stage is impracticable, I contend that the production should be brought as close as possible to the studio.

*Ben-Hur* is an outstanding example of the inadvisability of going too far afield. It cost, we are told, a million pounds—which may be a misprint for dollars, and a gross overstatement at that; however, it was enormously expensive, and a huge proportion of the money was spent on a wholly abortive attempt to stage the great chariot-race in Rome. Finally the whole thing was re-shot in Hollywood—and a modern producer

## *Film-land in Ferment*

could make it quite as effectively at a fraction of the cost.

Most of us are only too anxious to be convinced. We place our credulity freely at the service of the producer; and once he has engaged our confidence with his cunningly-placed "bit of real stuff", he can go ahead with his skilful fake. We are content.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### BESTWICH

BRITAIN has not, and is extremely unlikely ever to have, a Hollywood.

"But what about Elstree?" cries the reader in perplexity, having heard and read the name so often that it seems synonymous with British production.

Elstree is a Symbol—and rather a tinkling symbol at that. It is also the production centre from which a great many British films emanate, and if quantity and cost influence you, you must pay tribute to Elstree's importance.

But raw film stock costs twopence-halfpenny per foot, and about another pound per foot to spoil—just the same amount that it costs to turn it into good picture. So cost counts for precisely nothing.

As for quantity, that has as little to do with worth in assessing films as in determining the relative value of wrapping-paper and banknotes.

The importance of Elstree is largely due to the fact that one of the earliest British studios (now owned by the Blattner Company) stands there, and, on the well-known and firmly-established principle that you can only build a studio where one has stood before, British International Pictures Ltd. (originally British National Pictures Ltd.) erected their enormous studios near-by in the boom year of 1926, followed shortly afterwards

## *Filmland in Ferment*

by Whitehall Films (one of the companies that were washed away in the Great Talkie Flood) and the British and Dominions Film Corporation's Imperial Studio.

These four studio-blocks comprise the whole of the Elstree production-centre, which is situated, not at Elstree, but at Borehamwood, a mile and a half away.

The British International (commonly known as B.I.P.) establishment, the largest individual studio-group in Europe, consists of eight sound-stages and a huge silent studio, together with a sound-theatre for post-synchronising, the appropriate number of projection-rooms, stores, and offices, carpenters' and plasterers' shops, laboratories, an extensive "lot" for exterior scenes, and a large restaurant.

The B. & D. studios adjoining have three sound-stages, the only ones in the country furnished with Western Electric sound-recording apparatus.

The Blattner establishment consists of two smaller sound-stages, and the Whitehall studio (now owned by Audible Filmcraft, a composite firm compounded of several firms which failed singly to weather the talkie storm) has two large sound-stages which have latterly only been used for the production of newsreels and "interest" films.

This, then, is Elstree, the self-styled English Hollywood, towards which the eyes of patriotic cinema-goers are expectantly turned—and with what reward for their faith?

Quantity, in full measure, pressed down and running over . . . running to waste. . . .

In fact, of the 146 films, from 4,000 to 8,000 feet in length, produced in the period of renascence in England between April 1931 and April 1932, fifty-six came out



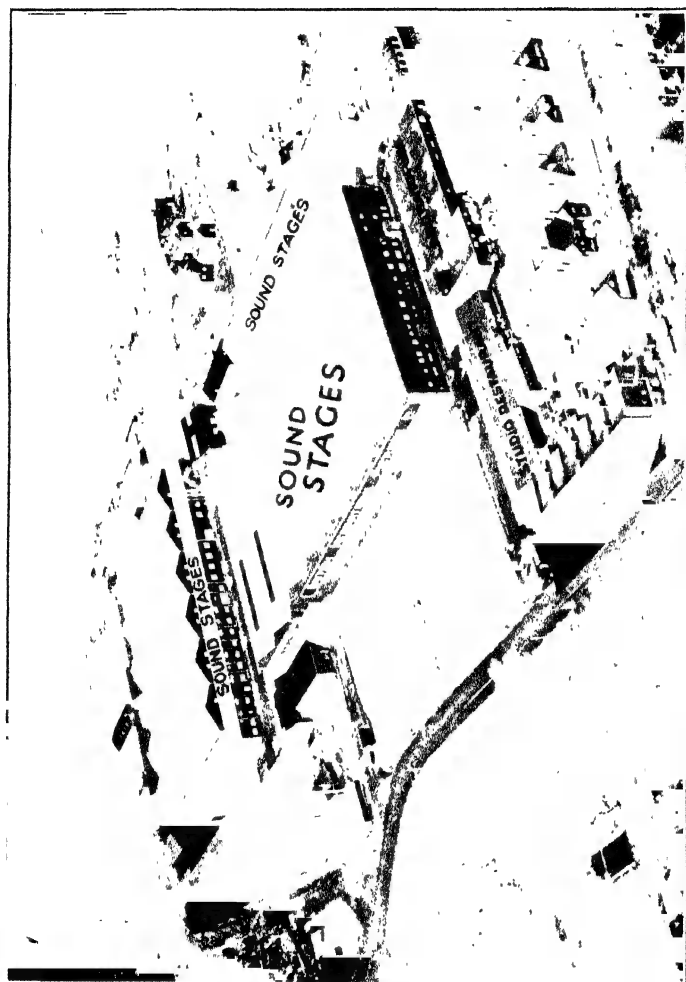


PLATE X.

"THE BRITISH INTERNATIONAL ESTABLISHMENT AT LISIEUX, THE LARGEST INDIVIDUAL STUDIO-GROUP IN EUROPE." (See p. 118.)



## *The Film*

of two studios at Elstree—B.I.P.'s and B. & D.'s; and this is the more remarkable in that the B.I.P. studios were closed for six weeks for cleaning and re-wiring.

These figures, however, represent the total output of three major companies—B.I.P. (with the exception of seven productions at the company's other studios at Welwyn), B. & D., and Paramount-British during its tenancy of part of B. & D.'s floor-space, and two films made by Cinema House Ltd., for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

And the quality, Heaven help us, the quality?

Of B.I.P.'s share of this total—the handsome figure of thirty-seven—one film, *The Flying Fool*, stands out as a fast-moving melodrama; of a familiar hero-wins-through type, it is true, but highly acceptable to the majority of filmgoers (including myself) who ask nothing better than a good story well told, first-rate acting, excellent photography, crisp dialogue, and clear speech.

*Hoc—et praeterea nihil.* The rest is mediocrity, for which is claimed a "box-office" success that reflects unkindly on the average intelligence of audiences.

British & Dominions also, during the arbitrary period under review, failed to achieve anything of outstanding importance—except, perhaps, that curious mixture of comedy and farce entitled *Up for the Cup*, which first adequately exploited on the screen the peculiar talents and personality of Sidney Howard.

B. & D.'s tenant companies did a little better. Paramount-British, after achieving a marked success with a screen version of Michael Arlen's *These Charming People*, plodded along with several mediocre productions before recapturing popular interest with *Service For Ladies*, a frothy, sparkling trifle which ranks as one of the best-made British talkies.

## *Filmland in Ferment*

After this came *Women Who Play*, which was disappointing, and *Aren't We All*, which was not.

Perhaps five notable productions from Elstree in a period of twelve months! Yet, because we must tie a tag to everything, we have tied this name "Elstree" like a tin can to the tail of British film-production. It hardly seems fair.

Where are the good British films made?

The answer is Shepherd's Bush, Islington, Twickenham, Teddington, Walton, and Beaconsfield.

Gainsborough Pictures at Islington easily top the score for the period under review with *Sunshine Susie* (an enormous success), *The Ghost Train*, *Michael and Mary*, *Lord Babs*, and *The Man They Couldn't Arrest*—the last an excellent example of preposterous but entertaining melodrama.

The only film made at Shepherd's Bush during the period we are examining was *Hindle Wakes*, after which the Gaumont studios closed down for re-building; but *Hindle Wakes* was worth a dozen average British films.

Beaconsfield turned out *The Calendar*, a polished production with a good story rapidly told.

To Twickenham's credit stand *Splinters in the Navy* (another excuse for presenting Sidney Howard, if excuse were needed) and *Jack o' Lantern*, a macabre melodrama so well directed and acted as to minimise its improbability.

And from Teddington we have Warner Bros.' first British production, *Murder on the Second Floor*, which comes a long way after *Sunshine Susie* but well in the running with most of the others.

This was directed by an American, William McGann;

## *The Film*

another American, Hayes Hunter, made *The Man They Couldn't Arrest* and *The Calendar*: and Walter Forde and Victor Saville share the other seven between them—Saville claiming *Hindle Wakes*, *Michael and Mary* and *Sunshine Susie*.

In addition to these accomplished facts, there are signs and portents at Walton-on-Thames and other "rented" studios which suggest that films comparable with the best may one day come from the small independent companies occupying them. Some of the men working for these companies have shown that they have grasped the principles of production, and when they have the capital and the right stories they will make outstanding pictures.

The principles . . . the capital . . . and the stories! Bear these three factors in mind. They mean the salvation or damnation of British films.

Five good films from Elstree, ten good films from the other fourteen centres—yet we continue slavishly to say "Elstree" when we mean British Film-Production—and this despite the fact that Elstree, as a production-centre, is no more likely to grow in importance than many of the others.

The name, by association, has developed a mournful note. I suggest abandoning it as a general term, and, at least while I am writing this book and you are reading it, applying another name to Hollywood's opposite number in England.

The British production-centres are at  
Beaconsfield, Bushey  
Elstree, Ealing, Esher  
Shepherd's Bush, Shepperton  
Twickenham, Teddington

## *Film-land in Ferment*

Welwyn, Wembley, Walton, Walthamstow  
Isleworth, Islington  
Cricklewood.

The initial letters give us the portmanteau word Bestwic. Let Bestwich, then, stand for British production. It has an English sound and an optimistic ring, and any caviller at the "h" will surely grant that at least one-eighth of British production is pure Hollywood!

Now to explore our composite city, town, or village of Bestwich, which almost completely encircles London.

Elstree we have seen; it lies north of London, just across the Herts border from Middlesex, and there potters away, continually promising achievement, continually achieving adequacy.

Welwyn Garden City is thirteen miles still further north, along the Great North Road. This was formerly the home of British Instructional Films, and the spiritual home of Anthony Asquith, captain of the intelligentsia, until its absorption by British International.

Soon after this, Asquith resigned, and the studio, with two good sound stages, was used as a factory for slapstick farces of the broader and less humorous type; but as I write these words only "Nature Films" are being produced here. . . .

Travelling in a clockwise direction we reach Walthamstow, once the home of British Filmcraft, a company which has disappeared into Audible Filmcraft. Nothing much seems to happen there now, though the stages have been sound-proofed in readiness for a possible tenant.

Towering above the slums of Islington stand the Gainsborough studios, which have proved the "white hope" of British production in the past year.

## *The Film*

This fine building rose like a phoenix from the ashes of an older studio, which was burnt out with tragic appropriateness during the filming of *Valley of Death*.

With its flat roof for location-work, and its "air-washing" system by which the atmosphere entering the studio is cleansed of every particle of soot and grime, it challenges comparison with any other studio in England—even those far outside the "fog-belt".

The south-east of London is innocent of film-production. The next production-centre, if it may be so flattered, is at Esher, where in a converted greenhouse silent films used to be made—on the proverbial shoe-string. Here Ronald Colman and Clive Brook made their film-debut.

Passing westward, we come to Walton-on-Thames, where stands a one-stage studio in which the first British films were made in 1898. This is nearly always let to the smaller companies—especially George King Productions and Westminster Films.

Across the river at Shepperton is the headquarters of Sound City Ltd., a small but pretentiously-named company which is as yet an unknown quantity.

Back across the tortuous Thames (twice) and through Bushey Park we reach Teddington, another of the main hopes of British production.

This is where Messrs. Warner Bros. First National Pictures Ltd. (to give a composite firm its full title) are making British films. Seven of the chief executives and senior members of the staff are American; the other ninety-three are British—and the films here turned out have, so far, been workmanlike, if unambitious.

The parent company in America has allotted £100,000 to extension of the British production plant—but

## *Filmland in Ferment*

whether this will entail rebuilding at Teddington or removal elsewhere is at present uncertain.

The studio here stands in the riverside grounds of a fine Georgian mansion, with plenty of room for expansion.

Ten minutes' drive away is St. Margarets, where in another small but historic studio the Twickenham Film Company operates. In the twelve months we have examined, this studio of one sound-stage produced seventeen films of from four to eight reels, including several "super-productions"—a remarkable achievement, rendered possible only by "shooting" two films at once in day and night shifts.

North again is Isleworth, where in the grounds of another Georgian mansion, Worton Hall, stand two sound-stages—yet another establishment of Audible Filmcraft, and leased spasmodically to the smaller companies.

Our pilgrimage next brings us north-eastward to Shepherd's Bush, where the magnificent new Gaumont studios stand beside the site of the large glass-roofed studio—now demolished—which has turned out many of the finest British films.

Here is the sister-studio to that at Islington, for they both pertain to the powerful Gaumont-British concern; but although the last production in the old Shepherd's Bush studio—*Hindle Wakes*—was completed in May, 1931, the new studios were not opened until a year later, and have not had time yet to prove their mettle.

We zig-zag westward now to Ealing Green, to visit Associated Radio Pictures' fine studios, built and financed by members of the wealthy Courthauld family.

## *The Film*

Basil Dean, the celebrated English stage producer, is in charge here, but up to the time of writing this the output has been unimpressive.

Taking Southall in our stride—where many early silent films were perpetrated in a converted 'bus-garage—we journey to Beaconsfield in the Chiltern Hills, the headquarters of the British Lion Company.

Here a number of Edgar Wallace's plays have been filmed—with especial success when made in conjunction with the Gainsborough Company.

Here again there is only one sound-stage, but clever art-direction, studio management, and general organisation has made possible almost continuous production.

Returning by way of Wembley Park, where the Associated Sound Film Industries studios, built in the old Exhibition grounds, are usually let to other companies, we reach Cricklewood, where in the vast Stoll studio a sound-stage has been built, but these premises also are let irregularly to other concerns.

Finally, having covered approximately 120 miles in our journey, we arrive at Bushey, where in the grounds of a house where the artist Herkomer had his school a small studio is used by "independent" producers—i.e., those unhampered by an excess of capital.

Such is Bestwick, our counterblast to Hollywood. From thirty-six sound and five silent stages, sprawling untidily round the greatest city in the world, will come the films which may in time place us in the position of supplying Europe, Asia, Africa, and Australia with the bulk of their cinema entertainment—with perhaps a place in the sun across the Atlantic as well.

Periodically we hear reports of new studios being built, with all the appurtenances of a Hollywood—but

## *Filmiland in Ferment*

such reports are usually found to precede appeals for the initial capital.

Before you read this, a great new production-centre may have sprung into being at Esher, or at Hayes, or on the Sussex Downs, or in any of the half-dozen other odd spots recently threatened; and no one will be more delighted—and surprised—than I.



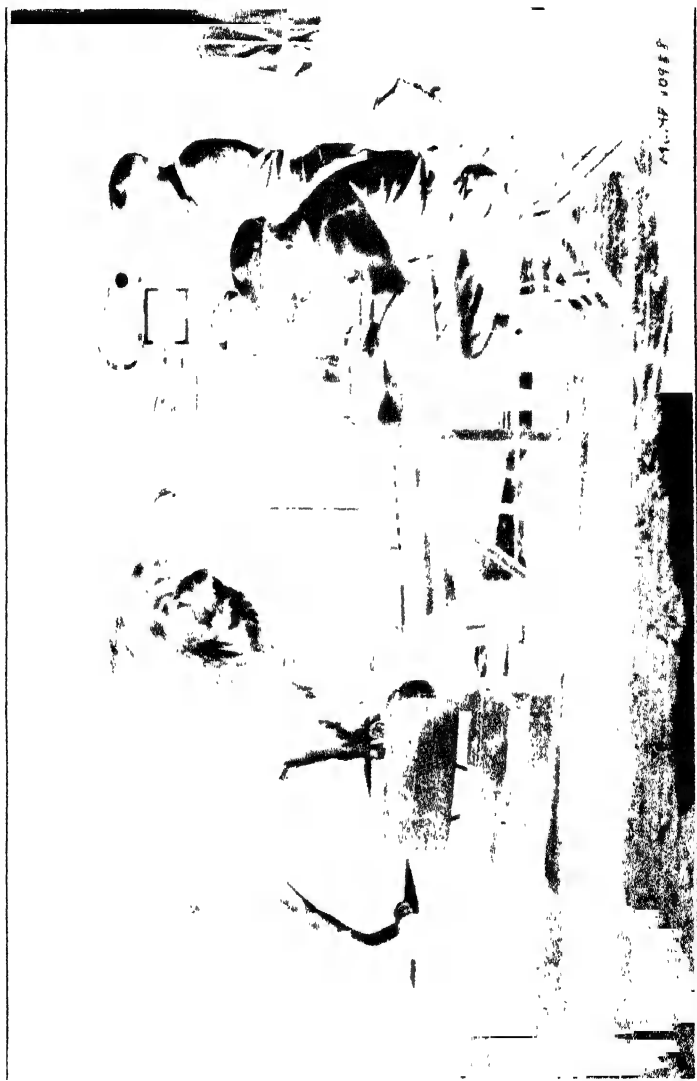


PLATE XL

M.C.M.'S. TRADE-MARK LION HAVING HIS VOICE RECORDED.



## CHAPTER XIX

### HOLLYWOOD

THE rock upon which the foundations of Hollywood's prosperity were laid is a rock of sandstone, and crumbling dangerously. Its name is The Star System.

The early film-makers had seen it on the stage; they had marked the success of the bad old system whereby the player—not even the character—was made superior to the story, the theme, the production, at last even the audience. “Henry Irving in *The Bells*”—not “*The Bells* with Henry Irving”; personality instead of impersonation; stardust thrown in the eyes of theatregoers.

“This,” said Hollywood rapturously, “is the berries. We also will make stars.” But they did not envisage the enormous difference in length of life between a stage-star and a film-star. It has been worth while and worth money to build up star names in the theatre, because their usefulness will last a lifetime and their names for ever. Forty years on the stage is an honourable career, but nothing to marvel at. Ten years on the screen—in leading rôles, that is—is a lifetime; there are “come-backs”, of course, a few years after the star has faded-out—desperate, often pitiful attempts to regain the lost position, occasionally successful for a while, more frequently ending in fiasco.

There seems to be only one reason for this. No film-star-producer (combined) has arisen strong enough to

## *Filmland in Ferment*

"put over" his own personality in the manner of the old actor-managers. Players have always been "cribb'd, cabined, and confined" by producers. Thus not sufficient of any personality has "come over" from the screen to hold the attention of the public for an indefinite period; that is, not sufficient of personality alone, and as the star has seldom a strong story to back him—strong stories being considered unnecessary to stars—he has speedily fallen by the wayside.

So stars have been continually rising, risen, waning, and gone; and so an enormous number of them have passed through Hollywood, the City of Stars.

But values in Hollywood, as throughout the film-industry, are estimated in dollars; there is hardly any other standard known; therefore the only way to make this year's star seem better and more important than last year's is to pay her more, pay more for the story which is to be her vehicle, spend more on the production generally, spend more on its publicity.

This procedure is all very well, but it presupposes a state of steadily increasing prosperity, and makes no allowance at all for a period of depression such as that from which the world is dazedly emerging.

Suddenly, incredibly, people could not afford to go to the pictures. This, you will say, was bad enough for the producing companies, which could draw in their horns and adjust the supply to the demand; but what about the unfortunate exhibitors, with cinemas to keep open and no receipts?

Unfortunately, the producing companies are in many cases the owners of the cinemas, so, in the picturesque phrase of Hollywood, they "got socked east and west". In fact, Universal's ancient disadvantage of having no

## *The Film*

chain of cinemas in which to show her product has in this past year proved a great advantage.

And not only have the producing companies this dead weight of theatres to carry through a slack period, but their studios also are a terrific expense. These are not merely vast barns, costing ground rent and interest on capital value; they are enormous "going concerns" which must be kept going, or the laboriously built-up organisations will crumble and go for naught.

A few particulars of the various studios will give a fair idea of the vested interests that seem so safely and wisely vested in boom-time and lodged so rashly and insecurely in time of slump.

At least four companies claim to have the largest and most important studios on the Californian coast—M.-G.-M., Fox, Paramount, and Universal.

The M.-G.-M. plant is at Culver City, one of the mushroom towns which are a feature of the West, standing about five and a half miles south-west of Hollywood and ten miles west of the city of Los Angeles.

Here fifty-three acres are enclosed by a barbed-wire fence, and in this "lot" are twenty-two sound-stages, containing approximately 360,000 square feet of floor-space; between these stages run more than ten miles of concrete roadway, part of which are used purely for traffic, part for the erection of exterior sets.

Anyone who has seen the B.I.P. lot at Elstree, where a thatched village rubs shoulders with a city square and that in turn with a Spanish town, can envisage this many times magnified and multiplied, with streets and buildings from every continent, many countries, and half the world's capitals.

Some of the huge sets are semi-permanent; for in-

## *Filmland in Ferment*

stance, the colossal arch built for *Ben-Hur* still stands, but now supports a pair of gigantic gates which have figured in several pictures.

But the immediate vicinity of the studios is not sufficiently spacious to house the exterior sets required; an additional thirty-five acres have been added, on which such vast sets as the prison-yard in *The Big House* are constructed, and the company also owns an adjacent canyon where entire villages can be built.

All this represents capital value. But, in addition, there are the executive, technical, and maintenance buildings—directors', supervisors', and writers' offices, art-department, property-rooms, wardrobe, laboratory, electrical buildings, power-house, dressing-rooms, school for child actors, club-rooms, and shops.

In these, exclusive of actors, directors, and writers, 1,500 people are continuously employed.

Figures can easily become boring and meaningless; but it is important to consider that, in the course of a year, enough raw film passes through the M.-G.-M. laboratories to girdle the earth three times, and in the same period two hundred and fifty tons of plaster and three million feet of timber are used in the erection of sets.

Important, because it indicates the size of the arteries through which the life-blood of production flows; if the blood-stream is allowed to dry, the arteries will harden; and the process of recovery from arterio-sclerosis is a long and painful one, no less for a sick business than for a human patient.

And this is only one company's plant. Universal City, in the San Fernando Valley about five miles north of Hollywood, is an actual municipality in itself, with its own mayor, police and fire departments, a Justice of the

## *The Film*

Peace with his own court, a Government post-office, and a telegraph office—the only self-contained community in the world which exists solely for the production of motion-pictures.

Universal is also unique among film companies in possessing its own zoo, with lions, tigers, elephants, camels, leopards, and monkeys; it also contains its own corrals, with hundreds of Western horses, a ranch-house where its large permanent staff of cowboys live, and its own chicken-farm with 25,000 white leghorns.

There are nine sound-stages at Universal, many of them subdivided, so that fifteen units can work simultaneously and independently.

A landmark on the lot is the famous replica of Notre Dame Cathedral, erected for *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and surviving the actor who leapt into world-fame in that film—Lon Chaney.

Even an extensive jungle has been erected for shooting subjects of the *Tarzan* type.

Universal City employs at least 2,500 people weekly, exclusive of players, and this is approximated on the Paramount property, which in addition to twenty-six acres in Hollywood itself, devoted to the fifteen sound-stages and the administrative and technical buildings, includes a 2,700-acre ranch for the production of "Westerns"; the ranch has two permanent street-sets, the studio-lot another two and a large park-set.

Movietone City in Beverley Hills, the home of the Fox Film Corporation, covers 108 acres and is valued at £5,000,000. The laboratory alone, which like the rest of the plant is Spanish in appearance, cost £200,000 to build and equip; there are five miles of paved streets, and fifteen acres of the 108 are under cover.

## *Film-land in Ferment*

An outstanding feature of the Fox plant is the use of electricity; electric typewriters, electric mimeographs for duplicating scripts, electric saws and planes in the workshops, power-sprays for painting sets, electric sewing-machines in the wardrobe, electric heating, ventilation, and of course lighting, everywhere; electric cooking in the restaurant—practically every department requiring heat, light, or power is served by the invisible giant.

At Burbank, north of Hollywood, stand Warner Bros.' ten sound-stages on a seventy-acre lot, erected and equipped (including supplementary buildings) at a cost of nearly £2,500,000; here there are only four miles of paved street; but Warners have also a "lot" of 11,000 acres in which to move their elbows.

Then there is Radio's outfit, standing next to Paramount's in the heart of Hollywood—a fifteen-acre plant containing 150,000 square feet of studio space, with capacity for six feature films simultaneously, and employing an average of 1,000 people; and in the vicinity are United Artists, Columbia, Metropolitan, and several smaller "indies", or studios owned by independent companies.

This gives only a shadowy idea of the machinery established in California for the making of the whole world's films; and if, as the result of unforeseen world conditions, the whole world wants fewer films for a while, this whole machinery has to keep on, running perhaps at lower speed, but costing almost as much.

All this is more or less unavoidable, but the additional burden of stars' salaries is not; contract players' salaries go on—unproductively, unprofitably, strangling the industry that gave them birth.

Bestwick will have to build up, in time, equally costly



## *The Film*

plant; but it has an enormous advantage in not having to pay fantastic salaries to players whose chief value lies in their publicity, and who do not advance the proper business of film-production by one iota.

Goliath's embarrassment is to David's advantage. By the time the world has sufficiently recovered from the pinch of depression to resume its regular filmgoing in earnest, Bestwick should have considerably reduced the lead which the "Big Business" of Hollywood has established.

## CHAPTER XX

### MILESTONES—AND SIGNPOSTS

It has had an odd history, this Filmland. Mighty rushes of progress, waverings, retrogressions, unexpected achievements which stand out prominently in a wilderness of banal and slavish imitations.

There are certain milestones along the road of film-production which are familiar to everyone interested in films.

*The Birth of a Nation*, one of D. W. Griffith's earliest films, besides being good entertainment, is important as having established half-a-dozen new principles of production. This and the same director's other films—*Way Down East*, *Orphans of the Storm*, *Broken Blossoms*—set a new standard in entertainment, and released the film from many of the shackles which had bound it.

As a pioneering effort I attach almost more importance to a film which Charles Chaplin directed, *A Woman of Paris*, than to any other film I have ever seen. This flung itself free from the cramping bounds of the subtitle, and also "featured" Adolph Menjou as a "villain" who was the most charming and human person in the story. This break from tradition required courage—but Chaplin has plenty of courage.

His comedies—*Shoulder Arms*, *A Dog's Life*, *The Kid*—tower head and shoulders above those of his imitators, not so much on account of new methods, however, as by

## *The Film*

reason of Chaplin's fertility in comic invention and his firm grasp of the principles of comedy and of Cinema.

His latest picture, *City Lights*, was a disappointment to me, partly because its gestatory period had been so long-drawn-out that I expected some new principles to have been evolved, or at least new applications of old principles, and partly because, though his employment of sound was mildly interesting and amusing, his subtitles and musical accompaniment were a survival of two of the mere subterfuges of the silent film.

The same spirit underlying *A Woman of Paris* inspired the brilliant German film *The Last Laugh*. The same faithful delineation of character, the same gentle satire on life, the same whimsical and intensely human touches—and the same hasty bargaining with the box-office in the last reel or so.

A Hollywood film which caused a profound sensation in British production circles was *Front Page*; its pace was so rapid, and its use of scarcely-heard dialogue so novel and effective, that no fewer than three directors told me they intended to speed up their next films to the same rate. That all three productions turned out to be rather funereal affairs was unfortunate, but not surprising when you know the limitations imposed on directors.

No review, however general, of film-production would be complete without mention of John Grierson's *Drifters*, made for the Empire Marketing Board.

It contains no story, but the action-cutting is so skilful that the interest never flags for a second.

Not once is the eye allowed to rest too long on any object or scene. The psychological fact underlying this is an interesting one. When we are interested in a place or event we look about us, eagerly, to take it all in.

## *Filmland in Ferment*

Conversely, when we find ourselves, in the cinema, as it were looking about us at various objects thrown in quick succession on the screen, we are subconsciously persuaded that we are interested—and we become so.

This is clever. It also suggests that through the despised channel of advertising films may come our establishment as a first-class film-producing nation.

Among the films which have impressed me most is Universal's *All Quiet On the Western Front*.

We had had spectacle—in *Ben-Hur*, *Captain Blood*, *The Ten Commandments*, and a host of others; we had had historical accuracy—in some of our own war films; we had had realism—in the German films; we had had as convincing acting scores of times; but we had never, as far as my memory goes, had a film that pandered so little to tradition, bowed so little to convention, toadied so little to the box-office; Erich Maria Remarque, the author, and Lewis Milestone, the director, were so passionately determined to strip war of its glory, its fluttering flags, and its trumpery trumpets that they produced a book and a play each containing that precious rarity—essential truth.

And, curiously enough, they got away with it. That doesn't always happen by any means.

Such a film as King Vidor's *Hallelujah*, for example, shed more light on the nature of the South American negro than a whole volume of psychological essays would have done; and there was a well-told and entertaining story to boot; but it simply was not wanted by cinema-goers. Thanks to the demoralising effect of the star-system, the public prefers to see Janet Gaynor and Charles Farrell in any rubbishy slung-together story; it then grows satiated and indifferent, and has to be

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shocked into new allegiance with a *Frankenstein*, a *Dracula*, an *Old Dark House*.

The film-makers of Hollywood have discovered that you can't keep throwing the public away from you and dragging it back like a woolly ball on the end of a piece of elastic; or, if you can, the elastic at last grows frayed and worn—and there comes a time when the ball stays away.

It has taken a depression that has shaken Filmland to its centre to bring about this realisation.

And what is being done about it? What new impulse are the overlords giving to this flagging practice of film-going?

As I write, there seems every reason to believe that the great new campaign will consist of a massing of big guns—a concentration of the total star strength of each company into one film.

This was started by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer with *Grand Hotel*; Gaumont-British countered with *Rome Express*—though in the latter case, despite the fact that every player has a well-known name which would help materially to fill any West End theatre outside which it was displayed, there are only two—those of Esther Ralston and Conrad Veidt—which could be described as “strong box-office names” in the cinema, and both belong to foreigners.

Here we have the absurd anomaly of nine un-starred players—every one a brilliant stage player who has done excellent work for the screen as well—being huddled together into one film, most of them in parts that hardly require an actor at all.

Is it so long a time since those monumental blunders, the film revues, were committed, that Hollywood and

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Bestwich have forgotten the lesson they taught—that it is not enough to assemble the company's star-strength unless every player has worthy material?

*The King of Jazz*, Universal's contribution to the cycle, succeeded—but it was so costly as to make very little profit. *Paramount on Parade* was perhaps the most insignificant—it had every appearance of having been written in half-an-hour over lunch and shot in odd corners of the studios on a hot Sunday morning when everyone wanted to go swimming.

British International's imitation, *Elstree Calling*, did little harm except appreciably to delay Jack Hulbert's screen stardom.

These are all, or nearly all, grisly remains dangling on the gibbet, warning evildoers of the penalties of transgression against the laws of Cinema. Two years—two short years—have they hung there. Is there so little left of them that producers fail to notice as they drive past? Or do they perhaps mistake the poor fluttering rags for laurel-wreaths?

Let the next cycle—if we must have cycles, which return exhausted to their starting-point—consist of efforts by every company to tell human stories in a manner more vivid, more expressive, more engrossing than lies in the power of the novel or the stage-play; to rid themselves of the shackles that bind them; gradually to improve the taste of audiences instead of pandering to it.

I want to see one or two companies digging down into the principles of this business—not continually scratching the surface. The others would soon follow, and the standard of film entertainment would be raised enormously.

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Hollywood and Bestwich have both had an opportunity of seeing what can be done when one Frenchman—to wit, René Clair—is responsible for the whole production; is it too much to expect Michael Balcon of Gaumont-British, or John Maxwell of British International, or Herbert Wilcox of British & Dominions, or Alexander Korda of London Film Productions, to hand a whole production over to one single Englishman—just as an experiment?

I believe the result would astonish and delight the world.





## PART II. THE ACTOR



## CHAPTER I

### FILM-ACTING AS AN ART

Just as it has become impossible to write of the sociology of England without mentioning the Great War, so we cannot approach this subject of films from any angle without coming to the sharp cleavage caused by the introduction of talking films.

Like the War, it caused a reversion to type; it threw the standard of entertainment back to the days when every film seemed to have been shot in a downpour of rain—except that for rain it substituted a thunderstorm—and it introduced a period of chaotic upheaval out of which almost anything might, and in fact did, emerge.

But it affected no one section of the industry so markedly as it did the actors.

In their panic lest they should miss "their perch on the band-wagon" and lose for nothing all their carefully garnered harvest of the silent years, producers were ready to try anything once.

The embryo microphone of those early days, "uncertain, coy, and hard to please" even when "pain and anguish wrung the brow" of the producer, rejected one after another of the established stars of the screen, and to fill their places both Hollywood and Bestwick turned their attention towards the stage.

Here Hollywood was fortunate, Bestwick more so. A wealth of acting ability was available in New York, but

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London West End players are second to none in the world, and in addition had one very favourable characteristic.

Their voices were devoid of that slight nasal intonation which nearly all Americans, however well-bred and educated, seem to possess—an intonation frequently so slight as to be inaudible to the naked ear, but which the earlier cantankerous microphone seized upon avidly and exaggerated into a harshly metallic jangle.

For a while this cacophony made producers and public alike almost despair of talkies; and it was thought that when the "novelty interest" in the new invention died, the invention itself might accompany it into oblivion.

However, the comparatively low and well-modulated English stage voice came to the rescue, and held the breach until there was time to improve the microphone (and of course the whole system of sound-recording and reproduction) to a point where it was possible to give to any voice its due quality, its true timbre, free from distortion or exaggeration.

So to-day we have Ruth Chatterton and Ann Harding, the Barrymores, Tallulah Bankhead, and Frederick March speaking with the voices of the men and angels that they are—voices which, although perceptibly Transatlantic, are as agreeable to us as our own stage stars'.

No less important is the fact that stage players, imported chiefly for their voices, remained for their acting ability.

There is not, as many people have imagined, an abysmal gulf separating stage-acting from film-acting.

Their principle is the same, their practice little different. The misconception has arisen from the fact that in silent film days, as is beginning to happen

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again, comparatively little of the acting was entrusted to the "actor".

The production of a scene in a film is of necessity split up into a series of sub-scenes, "shot" from various angles, and on the principle that actors are easier to move about than are either lights or camera, several of these sub-scenes, which may occur in widely-separated parts of the completed film, are shot from one angle before the camera moves round to the next.

Thus the actor has no continuity in his acting, and in silent days had very little idea what the connection between one scene and another might be—and frequently did not care.

This suited the director's book admirably. Screen players had always been chosen more for their pictorial value than for their histrionic ability, and so long as they were able to assume certain expressions and make certain gestures when told to do so, all that was required of them was that they should maintain their physical perfection, arrive punctually at the studio every morning, place themselves unreservedly in the director's hands, and draw their salaries at the end of the week.

In short, the ideal of a player, from the director's point of view, might be summed up in the convenient expression "beautiful but dumb".

The director, in fact, was frequently the actor as well, bullyragging his puppet players into a condition of misery or fear, coaxing or "jollyng" them into charm or rapture precisely as the day's schedule demanded.

But with the coming of talkies the scene which had been "shot" in tiny sections for a silent film had now to be prolonged sufficiently to allow of a full sentence being spoken, and a reply given, if the effect were not to

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be spasmodic and fragmentary; and this largely accounts for the holocaust which occurred among world-famous stars when the talkies arrived, for whereas anyone who has worked as a mannequin or played athletic games should be able to move gracefully and naturally, and anyone who is ordinarily sensitive can be browbeaten into the desired frame of mind, it requires an accomplished actor to play a long scene, varying, with the mood, the tempo of his speech and actions.

True, by skilful photography, recording and editing a scene is now dissected visually while the speech of the characters goes on uninterruptedly, thus allowing a return to the "silent" technique, but this device was perfected *after* the stage players became established as a necessary condition of film-production.

The new method, approximating more closely to stage-production, was a direct negation of the principles of Cinema; but by this time it had almost been forgotten that effects every whit as dramatic could be and had been obtained by skilled directors without the actors' aid.

The *stage*-producer who knows his job casts his characters suitably—that is, allotting to each player a rôle in which his or her particular qualities, characteristics, and accomplishments will prove most valuable—and then merely uses his skill and authority to tone up or down, to ensure the carrying-out of what he conceives to be the author's intention, and to draw out the latent powers which the actor himself is hardly aware of possessing. It is the producer's care to impede or limit as little as may be practicable the actor's own rendering of the part, lest the "character" be squeezed out of it and an automaton remain.

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Since the coming of talkies, the film-director has begun to follow his example of forbearance, as he needs must when the human material is not entirely plastic; and professional actors very seldom are.

True, there are one or two Svengali-like directors who always hypnotise their players into submission to their will, but they are very few and far between.

Two of these are Ernst Lubitsch and Josef von Sternberg, who elicit from certain players, notably and respectively Maurice Chevalier and Marlene Dietrich, performances such as other directors have utterly failed to obtain from them.

There is nothing sinister in these cases. It is simply, in the case of Lubitsch, that he is a man of most dominating personality, extraordinary sympathy, unusual sense of character, and an almost legendary reputation as a director; and these qualities act hypnotically upon Chevalier, establishing an ascendancy to such a degree that the latter will bring the fullest of his talents to bear and strain every nerve to obey his master's will.

In the case of Von Sternberg, it is largely suggestion and superstition. He directed Marlene Dietrich's first world-success, *The Blue Angel*, and she feels that he is "her" director, and places herself unreservedly in his hands.

This system is an anomaly, while there is scope for acting. With the coming employment of "types" in place of actors it will become logical and general.

It must be remembered that the performance the public sees on the screen is the performance the director approves—or as near to it as the player can approach.

This is by no means so in the theatre, where the producer usually relinquishes the reins on the first or second

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night, handing them over to the stage-manager, who may, though unofficially, permit a player gradually to change his reading of a part to suit his own ideas.

The actor, then, should not be condemned out of hand for a worse performance in any film than in a previous one. The fault may lie with the director, upon whom lies, or should lie, the onus of ultimate responsibility.

It may be taken then that the *art* of film-acting has become in essence, for the time being, identical with the *art* of stage-acting. The difference is a minor one of *technique*, a mere matter of mechanics, which our stage players, in common with those of Broadway and the Continent, have experienced little difficulty in mastering.

As the theatre-stage is smaller and more limited than life, so is the visual scope of the camera (at least in scenes which call for *acting*) smaller and more limited than the stage.

Everything is compressed, constricted, for it has to be magnified on the screen to from ten to hundreds of times life-size.

In a stage-set, two characters may have to converse unnaturally loudly from a normal distance apart. In a film-set, they will be obliged to speak in natural tones but stand unnaturally close together.

Again, the detail undergoes a change in values. The stage-actor who has to bear in mind the back row of the gallery as well as the front row of the stalls makes his gestures and facial expressions and pitches his voice accordingly, exaggerating them so that they will not be altogether wasted on the cheaper parts of the house but moderating them so as not to offend the people who keep the fabric of the theatre together by paying twelve-and-sixpence for their seats.



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The film-actor is hampered by no such considerations. A highly-perfected sound-system is waiting to receive his natural tones and throw them into the auditorium with such exactly modulated volume that the rich and the poor, the ninepennies and the five-and-ninepennies are treated with equal consideration.

And the finer, the more subtle, his gestures and expressions the better, for the camera will record them meticulously and the projector reproduce them faithfully down to the merest flicker of an eyelid.

This factor accounts largely for the prodigious success of such "intimate" actors as George Arliss, who is able to convey with a half-smile a world of meaning. I have seen the original of that same cynical, whimsical half-smile from the fourth row of the stalls, but missed it entirely from the second row of the pit. On the screen it is almost put into one's hand. It attains its true value.

The brief day of the barnstormer in the cinema is definitely past. The essentially fine actor has come into his kingdom. In a sense it is a pity that it too should be about to crumble, but there is consolation in the knowledge that his proper sphere, the stage, faithfully awaits his return.

## CHAPTER II

### FILM-ACTING AS A BUSINESS

LET me say at once that I do not propose to give here a schedule of the salaries paid to all the best-known players of the day.

In the first place, although I have heard them often enough, I have made a practice of forgetting them immediately, for no one but the production chief, the studio accountant, the player himself, and his agent ever actually *knows* what a player receives for his services—except, in a few cases, the Official Receiver in Bankruptcy.

Figures are published—sometimes too high, in order to emphasise the importance of the recipient, sometimes too low, for the purpose of bamboozling the Commissioners of Inland Revenue, but never correctly, for this would yank the star rudely from the golden mists of glamour that surround him and place him on equal terms with a mere football player, Cabinet Minister, or champion heavyweight.

Besides, as the broken-down actor exclaimed wistfully: “What is money?”

Those few among us who remember vaguely what it looks like are best aware of its impermanence. To say that an actor receives £500 a week this year may be equivalent next year to saying that he received three hundredweight of waste-paper, which has since dis-

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appeared for ever into the limbo of a bank-failure, a robbery, a revolution, an embezzlement, or a war.

The actor's peculiar economic condition is such that the fact of his receiving £500 a week, or of his being out-at-elbows, is no true criterion of his general state.

The £500 a week may be going up in smoke more quickly than he can receive it; the holes in his elbows may be due to his having recently received £500 a week.

Actors as a class are perhaps less stable, less prudent than members of any other profession. Their work stimulates their imagination, their camaraderie implies hospitality, hospitality connotes expenditure—and really imaginative expenditure will very soon knock a hole in a weekly pittance of £500.

All we can usefully do, therefore, is to examine the general conditions under which film-actors work, and leave the assessment of actual salaries to that Bogey-man whose abominable duty it is.

In Hollywood, where the long-contract system is in vogue, a successful player is comparatively "on velvet"—unless, of course, he has been an "unknown", placed on, say, a three-years contract, renewable at the option of the studio, as a speculation by the producing company, for in that case his services are likely to have been acquired on very low terms.

He may then have the painful experience of watching his sponsors make a huge profit from his films, while his own salary remains at its original modest figure. This happened to Lewis Ayres, who attained world-wide celebrity as a result of his performance in *All Quiet on the Western Front*, yet was drawing a salary usually paid to small-part actors.

True, in his case the company is said to have increased

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his emolument as an act of grace, and this was not an uncommon gesture in times of prosperity; since the slump, however, companies have held to the letter of their contracts—except when they deemed it advisable to *cut down* salaries; and this has led to considerable friction, and, in the cases of a few newly-risen players such as Ann Dvorak and James Cagney, open rebellion.

In actual dollars and cents, it may be better for an actor to be on long contract; but there are other considerations to be weighed.

Consider, for instance, the case of a certain actor who was “starred” before the dawn of talkies.

The microphone did not take kindly to his speaking voice, and although he is said to have remedied that by having delicate operations performed on his vocal chords, his stock has slumped in the studio, and he has all but vanished from the screen.

Yet his enormous salary goes on, and by the irony of Fate this “great lover” who once packed the cinemas of the world is being paid thousands of dollars a week *not* to appear, or to figure only in very occasional films.

As a free-lance—that is, not bound by contract to any particular studio—he might have had a chance of rehabilitating himself; but it is not in human nature to throw away a fortune, and he continues to draw a fat weekly cheque for idling.

Unthinking people may envy him—but most of us would find it a demoralising experience.

Another danger to the contract player lies in his or her being cast in unsuitable rôles, or under the wrong director. A case much nearer home than the above comes to my mind.

Elizabeth Allan, a young West End player of some

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promise, was allotted a minor rôle in a film at Twickenham, and as a result of her work in that she was placed on long contract by Twickenham Film Studios Ltd.

She appeared in several films there without setting the adjacent Thames on fire or attracting the attention of the critics until, there being no part suitable for her in the next Twickenham production, she was "farmed out" to Paramount British Productions Ltd. for *Service for Ladies*.

The direction, photography, and general attention she received in that production placed her immediately in the front rank of British screen players, and thereafter she went straight to a star part in a West End theatre, whereas without that "lucky break" she might still have been languishing almost unknown at Twickenham.

Of course, the Twickenham company is entitled to retort that without the "lucky break" of being placed on contract there she might still be playing tiny parts in films as well as on the stage, and that is perfectly true. But the instance serves to illustrate a danger of the contract system.

I recently came across an interesting comparison of two salaries, of neither of which I propose to quote the amount.

Herbert Marshall, who has since developed with startling suddenness into one of our best screen propositions, and has been swallowed up by Hollywood, was playing in his first talkie, *Murder*, at Elstree.

A slightly elder actor, even better known in the West End in similar parts, and certainly much more highly paid, was offered a part by the same company in another film—at a weekly salary £30 less than Marshall's.

When he argued that he received more money in the

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theatre, it was pointed out to him that Marshall, as well as being a character-actor, still looked youthful enough to play juvenile parts on the screen, whereas the elder man, though he could make-up to deceive a theatre-audience, was just too old to convince the camera that he was young.

A tragic difference.

It may be questioned whether the ordinary leading player in films is economically in a sounder position than the "character" player.

I say "ordinary", because in some isolated cases, such as those of George Arliss, Marie Dressler, Erich von Stroheim, "Chic" Sale, the late Lon Chaney, or the late Louis Wolheim, the character actor *is* the leading player; but that is outside the present discussion.

As a rule the magnitude of the part played by the character actor is subordinate to that of the leading player, i.e., its actual length is less, though its importance may in some cases be greater.

Financially, at all events, it is inferior; but there are other considerations.

One is that there are more character rôles in a film than leading rôles, and consequently the character player has a greater chance of continuous employment.

It is not pertinent to argue that there are more character actors than leading players available for the parts, for there is to all intents and purposes an infinitely large number of each.

Also, the expenses of the two classes of players are vastly different, especially in America, where stars and featured players are expected to live much more in the public eye than they do here.

Housekeeping, dress bills, entertainments, personal

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publicity (as distinct from that supplied by the studio), travelling, sport, poor relations, and the thousand-and-one forms of petty blackmail to which a star is subjected, run away with a large proportion of even the princely salaries ruling to-day.

Here, again, I do not propose to waste your time by hazarding amounts. To say that a star pays £10,000 a year to her dressmaker is simply inviting her rival to declare that *she* pays £15,000. This kind of publicity costs nothing, except, in the end, our credulity; but it renders purposeless, except for sensationalism, any quotation of figures. The only thing we know about such figures is that they will not be correct—and this is not cynicism, but hard fact.

Few, and fortunate, are the American stars who have the ability and the inclination to live simply, unostentatiously, and inexpensively. Greta Garbo and Erich von Stroheim are two outstanding examples; Lon Chaney and Louis Wolheim were others; but in the main, the players who before their elevation to stardom had tasted the delights of luxury now indulge their taste for it, while those who have risen from obscurity have no idea what to do with their money, and rush into extravagance. In either case, "pop goes the weasel".

In England, players are in much better case. I could tally on the fingers of one hand the British film-actresses who feel themselves obliged to dress very expensively "off-screen".

By "very expensively" I mean more expensively than they would on a similar income in private life.

Neither need a British "featured player" maintain an imposing establishment.

Madeleine Carroll has married a wealthy man, but,

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before that, she lived in a small flat in a back street off Marylebone Road. Mabel Poulton rents one still. Anne Grey lives in a mews. So does Nora Baring, when she is in Town. Benita Hume has a small top-floor flat in Mayfair.

Contrast these with the palatial and often fantastically elaborate homes of the stars of Hollywood. The reason for the difference lies in the fact that, over here, it is fashionable to be poor and blame the economic world-crisis, whereas in America it is still fashionable to be wealthy—wealth being the only outward visible sign of success. And Success, in America, is God.

Naturally those English actresses who *are* “seen about” must look smart and prosperous. I know one girl who, after making a promising start in her film-career, “faded out” by reason of being seen in the West End of London in slovenly attire and with a sketchy make-up.

But the British player is in an economically sounder position at the moment than the Hollywood player, and the position is improving every year.

Our leading stage players have never found it necessary to spend money spectacularly, and there is no reason why film-players should not follow their example.

Happy are those who have done so, for the end of the golden harvest is in sight, and in the scramble back to the theatre there may be hard times for many.



## CHAPTER III

### THE SEARCH FOR TALENT

ASSUMING for the moment that we must continue, at least for a while, to have film-stars, the question arises—where are they to be found?

Incredible as it may seem, I know personally a number of highly-esteemed business men working in Wardour Street and in Hollywood who believe their fortunes to depend upon their ability to answer this question, and who yet admit their utter ignorance of the first principles of the science of star-finding.

In fact, they so grievously err as to regard star-finding not as a science which can be acquired, but as an art which depends, as other arts depend, upon the natural talent of the artist—a misapprehension which is at the bottom of the much-lamented “girl-shortage” in Best-wich.

Girls are to be found anywhere.

Film-stars are to be found in a proper attitude towards these girls and boys.

There is hardly any pretty, well-built, and intelligent girl, any good-looking, stalwart, and intelligent young man, in full possession of the normal faculties, who cannot be shaped into first-class box-office material.

This, though it sounds a sweeping statement, will bear the closest inspection.

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What other qualifications do we require in our film-star?

Beauty? The cameraman, the make-up man, the lighting expert, the masseuse, the dietician, and the physical-culture expert can together confer it, if the right bony structure be there.

Sex-appeal? There I clash with those moron princes of Filmland who hold that a girl must be conspicuously bedworthy before she can be screenworthy. Even if (which I stoutly deny) the bulk of male cinema-goers sit in their tip-up seats with lust in their hearts, we know that the majority of cinema-goers are women, whom mere sex-attraction (in a girl) is unlikely to please. In any case, the average man's attitude towards a pretty girl is venial rather than vicious. A kiss and a cuddle, yes—and if sex-appeal means that, almost any pretty girl has it.

Personality? What is personality but eagerness and a zest for life in some or all of its phases? And which of us is utterly devoid of this quality? It is for the producer to discover and direct it.

Education? The assimilation of knowledge is a matter of time, teaching, and intelligence.

Acting ability? Acting can be taught to the willing and intelligent learner. Most of us are "natural actors" to our looking-glasses. The rest is technique.

A good microphone voice? As I have shown, this is not the rarity it was. Madame Novello-Davies, the famous teacher of singing and elocution, states specifically "You Can Sing". You can also speak.

Poise? Self-confidence? Deportment? All these, as I hope presently to convince you, are frequently acquired.

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But . . . charm? Yes, that certainly is a poser. In his play *What Every Woman Knows*, J. M. Barrie makes Maggie Wylie say of charm: "If you have it, you don't need to have anything else; and if you don't have it, it doesn't much matter what else you have."

But, after all, what is charm but the manifestation of a mental attitude towards one's fellow-creatures, blent of sympathy and tact? Sympathy—which is a natural derivative of true intelligence—makes us respect our fellow-creature's point of view, and tact—born of self-possession—enables us to convince him of this attitude.

That is the true secret of charm; and if the prospective film-star possesses the basic constituents—a high intelligence and self-possession—the rest will come; and of these two, self-possession can be taught to any intelligent person, which reduces the prime factor of charm to intelligence.

There is also a superficial element sometimes called charm—and with at least equal propriety, since the word derives from the Latin *carmen*, a song—which consists of physical movements; but these can be traced to the desire to be charming, and, if required, are as easily taught as the steps of a dance.

Good looks, then, not only of face but of figure. Normal faculties. Intelligence. Willingness.

Any girl or boy possessing these qualifications can be developed into a world-famous film-star.

This, far more impressively than any quotation of vast sums received and disbursed, indicates the power of the film industry. It can actually take any one of the hundreds of thousands of good-looking and intelligent boys and girls who want to be film-stars and make of them Princes of the Earth and Enchanters of Nations,

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beside whom a mere Congressman or Cabinet Minister or Winner of the Irish Sweep is dwarfed by comparison.

The fact that this is seldom done is merely a reflection on the enterprise, initiative, and imagination of producers.

Film-stars, so long as we need film-stars, should be *made*, as a film is made—by bringing to bear on the raw material all the skill and care available; whereas they are usually not made at all, but allowed to come by chance.

They drift haphazard to their thrones by a dozen casual avenues—through the ranks of the extras, from the Broadway or the West End stage, from theatrical touring companies, from the amateur stage, from amateur films, from the days of the silent screen, through acting academies, through influence, through bluff, through sex-appeal, through bribery, through cheek.

This is bad. A film-player should be allowed to struggle, but not to straggle, to success.

For one thing, success so gained is neither complete nor lasting; for another thing, the principle is uneconomic inasmuch as it promotes—or rather permits—an irregular supply of talent, starving the market one year and glutting it the next.

The basic principle of Cinema is art served by science; and, following this principle, the supply of film-players should be scientifically regulated.

Yet Hollywood has made few attempts at organised star-building. Bestwick, as far as I know, has made only one which has had a chance to prove its value.

Five years ago the Paramount Company inaugurated at its Long Island studios in New York a training-school for young film-actors. Sixteen boys and girls were

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selected and trained for eight months, and were then "tried out" in a film (silent, of course) called *Fascinating Youth*.

The picture was well produced, directed, and photographed, and based on a story specially constructed to present the youngsters to the best advantage. It resulted in the "discovery" of Charles (then Buddy) Rogers, who thereafter attained considerable success and was subsequently allowed to disappear by reason of ill-advised publicity; Thelma Todd; and Josephine Dunn.

Young Rogers's discovery alone would have made the experiment an economic success and justified its repetition; but it was not repeated—at any rate on those lines or that scale.

There is, however, in Hollywood a definite system of developing young players who have come—frequently by hap—to the "featured" class, known as "grooming for stardom"; also the Western American Motion Picture Advertisers, known as the W.A.M.P.A., select thirteen promising youngsters (called Wampas Baby Stars) from each year's films, and these are "groomed" by the various companies to which they are under contract. Clara Bow, Janet Gaynor, Joan Crawford, and Loretta Young are among those so distinguished.

This may not be a perfect system, since it only develops those whom blind chance has selected; but it is infinitely preferable to the almost complete absence of any system at all, which we find in our village of Bestwick.

When Associated Sound Film Industries of Wembley produced *City of Song*, considerable ballyhoo was made about "building" Betty Stockfeld into a star.

The spelling of her name was altered to Stockfield (to

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Anglicise her, she being already as English as Anne Hathaway's Cottage); her hair was dressed differently, and so was she; a mole was removed from somewhere or other—and behold! a star.

But the productions of A.S.F.I. were so few that Betty was released after that picture, and the star-building process fizzled out.

The first determined and sustained effort to build an actress in Bestwich up to star value was made in the case of Molly Lamont.

This girl, who was a dancing-teacher in South Africa, won a film-personality contest organised by local newspapers, and was awarded a long contract with British International Pictures at Elstree.

She was given tiny parts at first, which grew gradually more important, and has now attained the dignity of "leads"; the colour of her hair has been changed, and great care has been taken to dress her becomingly and photograph her from the best angles.

More than this, she has been given confidence. When she arrived at Elstree, barely a year ago, she was a shy, retiring, and self-conscious girl. She is now a young woman of considerable charm and poise, an asset to the studio and an excellent advertisement for her colony; and the transformation has been wrought by the general attitude towards her in the studio, where she has been treated as one who, largely by her own efforts, is developing steadily into a first-class screen proposition.

This is sound psychology, and is the way to make stars; incidentally, it is almost the only case on record of a Press competition-winner on this side of the Atlantic ever coming to anything, for such contests are usually conducted with more solicitude for the newspaper's

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circulation than for the welfare of either the winner or the Industry.

A similar line is being taken by B.I.P. with regard to Lesley Wareing, another contract-girl, but she has hardly been there long enough for the treatment to show signs of effect; and, as I write, another competition-winner, Judy Kelly, has just arrived at the British International studios—this time from Australia.

Herbert Wilcox, head of the British & Dominions Film Corporation, has done good work in “grooming” Chili Bouchier; as Dorothy Bouchier, however, she seems to have had a good deal of the zest of life, which was one of her chief attractions, groomed out of her.

Gainsborough Pictures at Islington have made a praiseworthy attempt to incubate talent.

By means of another newspaper competition, a dozen girls were selected, and were paid a regular salary for six months, for which they were required to attend daily at the studio (where they were given “bits” and crowd-work to accustom them to the camera) and were also expected to render a weekly account of the manner in which their time had been spent.

They also had regular classes in dancing and physical culture, and, like Molly Lamont, were experimented upon to determine their most becoming style of hair-dressing, shade of make-up, and camera-angles.

This is the sum total of the organised search for, and development of, film talent in this country.

But film-producers must have girls, and they find them ready-made in the most obvious place—the theatre.

The mere fact that a girl has never played in a film, or that she is not at present photographic, or that she is only suited to the particular part she happens to be

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playing on the stage, does not matter two straws to the producer. He engages her, and she is pushed into his next film in any kind of part. . . .

And then he wonders with vague indignation why this girl who seemed so good on the stage is a complete failure on the screen.

He is merely reaping the harvest of his own indolence and stupidity, but he fails dismally to locate the origin of his trouble. Instead he inveighs bitterly against the English girl, who, he declares, is too repressed, too refined, too phlegmatic.

This is the most utter bunkum. English girls do excellent work on the stage, where they are coached, trained, "produced"—given, in fact, a fair chance to burgeon.

Almost anyone, set down in the violently unfamiliar surroundings of a film-studio, and subjected to the ordeal of a "voice and photographic test", which means acting in cold blood and alone, probably for the first time, would appear repressed, refined, phlegmatic. It is the most embarrassing and disconcerting experience imaginable—especially for a girl who has begun her stage career well and feels keenly the importance of making a favourable start in the new medium.

Sooner or later, unless and until we have learned to do without screen-actors, the organised discovery and development of British film girls—and boys too, for that matter—must be instituted on a large scale.

Matters, certainly, have improved since the immediate pre-talkie days, when girls were picked up here, there, and everywhere, and flung on to the screen as recklessly as tomatoes against a wall—and as usefully.

One girl was noticed by a director as she walked down a



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street; she played one leading part, and disappeared from the studios. Another lass was selling programmes in a West End theatre when the screen claimed her; it hastened to disclaim her, however, after her first film.

A few of the girls who were thus collected in the silent days have survived the coming of talkies—notably Chili Bouchier, who was “spotted” by an agent while sitting among the audience at the Coliseum.

For the rest, producers and casting-directors keep their eyes glued to the stage, and when they pick a peach from that fertile tree they do not even trouble to ripen it for the screen.

In an impulse of mistaken kindness a producer may occasionally put an inexperienced friend into a leading rôle, the experiment can usually be expected to end in ignominious failure.

The product of screen-acting “academies” is suspect—excepting children, who are frequently drawn from this source. Adult pupils usually grow so “mannered” and theatrical as to be useless for films.

So the stream of new blood drifts into the studios, now rushingly, now sluggishly—and, for the most part, drifts on down the sewer called Oblivion, the impossible and the potential in an indistinguishable mass.

Too many are called, too few are chosen.

## CHAPTER IV

### CASTING

REFERRING in a previous chapter to the merits and demerits of the long-contract system, I skimmed lightly over one of its chief disadvantages—that of a player being cast in unsuitable rôles because he or she is being paid and must be employed.

It is not, however, a light matter, being detrimental to the interests of the player, the director, the production company, and ultimately, of course, the audience and the cinema box-office.

When a Parliamentary Cabinet is formed, the public is frequently bewildered by the appointments to Ministerial posts. A mild little man who has previously been Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries is created Secretary for War. A country gentleman with a passion for pheasants is sent to preside over the Admiralty. A retired but die-hard Colonel of Fusiliers is made Minister of Roads and Transport, and so on.

But these gentlemen do not have to look the part—for Cabinet Ministers have only general, never individual, characteristics—or even feel the part. Their hands are guided by a highly efficient bureaucracy of permanent officials.

The film-star who is miscast, however, has no such support or refuge. He must look the character and feel

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the character sufficiently well to convince a very critical world-audience that he *is* the character.

The difficulty of this, even in a suitable rôle, is so great in itself that it seems superfluous to augment it by miscasting. Yet there are few players on either side of the Atlantic who have not groaned under this handicap.

Consider the quandary of the producer who finds himself with a story which he particularly wishes to film, and a player to whom he is paying a high salary and for whom there is no suitable rôle in the picture.

He has a choice of four courses, and every one of them unsatisfactory. He can postpone production of this particular subject until he has a suitable player available to play the leading part. He can engage a suitable player and "farm out" the one he has on contract. He can alter the story to fit his player. Or he can force his player like a square peg into a round rôle and hope for the best.

A sorry choice!

On the face of it, the first course is obviously the best if he has actually bought the rights, though not if he has to renew an expensive option on the story. But, if it is an important, original type of subject, it is only necessary for rival producers to get wind of his having it, to prompt them to rush into production of similar subjects; thus it behoves him to bring it to the screen as soon as may be, to avoid finding himself in the ruck of imitations of his own theme.

The second course has its peculiar danger; there are always vigilant eyes watching for the downfall of every star, and a whisper that a contract player is being "shelved" is apt to do him a great deal of harm. In the film world, as in the world of commerce, it is Success

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which succeeds. Unemployment, even temporary, suggests failure—and causes the capital value of the star to decline perceptibly.

The third course—that of altering the part to fit the player—is all too often followed without realisation of the risk. Its inadvisability lies in the fact that a narrative, whether in novel, stage, or screen form, should be above all integral—not a mere collection of inarticulated parts. To alter a major part—or chief character—without reconstructing the whole story is to run a grave risk of destroying its value, since that one character must react on every part of the story; and if you reconstruct the whole story it is no longer the original one, but another.

Producers faced with this problem usually take the line of least resistance and either mangle the story or force the player into the part as it stands with less compunction than they would display in squeezing a bunion into a tight boot.

A leading player may protest. Many Hollywood contracts contain a clause providing that the player shall have the right to veto unsuitable parts; and even in Bestwick, where nearly all the players are free-lances, a successful one can, and occasionally does, refuse to play a rôle offered. But the majority find work too scarce and precious to allow of their quarrelling with their bread-and-butter.

Even to the producer who is not hampered with contract players, the task of casting presents difficulties undreamed by the layman.

Some time ago I was assisting the producer of a play to cast it for production in London, and we actually had to make eight successive selections for one part before

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we could find a reasonably suitable player available. This actor was working, that one was rehearsing, a third was broadcasting, a fourth wanted more money, a fifth did not "see himself" in the part, a sixth was expecting a better engagement, a seventh fell ill—all perfectly good and genuine reasons, but a confounded nuisance for all that.

In Filmland things are just as difficult, because, to all intents and purposes, the available personnel is the same in both cases.

Pity, then, rather than blame the poor casting-director who, frequently with the haziest idea of what the story is about, has to cast all but the three or four leading rôles, which are usually decided by a more or less official executive committee.

But his difficulty is not confined to the number of players he *cannot* have; he is far too frequently hampered by the people he *must* have.

This distressing phenomenon, one of the curses of the film world, may be conveniently crystallised in the word Nephews.

For people with influence to wish to find occupation for their sons and daughters is reasonable enough, but as a matter of fact the strings are seldom pulled on behalf of the puller's own progeny. The latter are more usually found occupation in some sphere to which they are suited. It is for more distant relatives, such as nephews, cousins, and "in-laws" that niches have to be provided in this long-suffering industry; and it speaks volumes for the comparative lack of rationalisation of the film-industry that such niches *are* found, or made, and occupied in perpetuity by ineffectuals whose only qualification for employment of any sort is their blood-

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relationship to someone with the power and willingness to pull strings on their behalf.

When you see a totally unsuitable person given an important rôle, either to ruin it or have it cut down to disappearing point and thereby upset the whole balance of the film; when you see a player's bad performance glossed over by a particular section of the Press; when you see a gawky youth cumbering the studio floor, obviously out of his element; when you find a young man or woman strolling about the studio with an air of detachment and speaking vaguely of having a "super-vising job", or a "job on the Art side", or a "job in the scenario department", without being able to specify the *kind* of job—depend upon it, that is a nephew or niece of a member of the Board of Directors, or of an executive officer, or of a shareholder, who has been "found a job". And this disease spreads apace, for "little fleas have lesser fleas upon their backs to bite 'em".

Bad films may come and bad films may go, but production continues to creep along with this dead weight of Nephews slung from its neck like the Ancient Mariner's albatross.

There are, even in Darkest Bestwick, casting-directors who know, love, and study their job. They keep a card-index of players, cross-referenced, as would be done in any other business. They spend their evenings at the theatre in search of unsuspected talent—a most useful occupation, since our producers' deplorable lack of system and enterprise renders this our only recruiting-ground. They can tell at a glance what players of any class or type are available, their experience, suitability, and salary.

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And all this elaborate machinery is wasted because certain players *have* to be used. The casting-director is beset by a plague of Nephews (among whom I include studio "pets" who have made a good impression in one successful film and must thereafter be lugged by the heels into every other); and his usefulness dwindles to the point of "calling" crowds and interviewing film-aspirants.

In some cases the matter of casting is reduced to absurdity in another way. A powerful agent, wielding considerable influence in a studio, will manage to insinuate his favourite clients into rôle after rôle, entirely irrespective of their suitability. The producer who countenances this malpractice has only himself to blame for the bad films his studio turns out.

In using the word malpractice I am not hinting at commission-splitting or any such direct infringement of the law. My experience of British studio convinces me that graft, though existent, is very rare.

But there are other ways of killing a cat than by choking it with cream, and "back-scratching" is practised in many diverse forms. One agent is a "good mixer": another plays poker with the producers—and does not make the mistake of always winning; a third has an aunt who has shares in the company; a fourth knows an earl . . . and so it goes on, with the gap between the rôle and its most suitable player widening daily.

By the way, about that earl. He is another curse.

Bestwick is, fortunately, backboneed by people who have worked their way up from subordinate positions to executive posts; and the sheer sturdy ability which they have thus gained is discounted by only one little, little foible—snobbery.

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This disease is rife. Anyone with any pretension to rank can be sure of a job in the studios, either in a subordinate post which is practically a sinecure, or in regular crowdwork. A visit by foreign Royalty is of far greater moment than the discovery of a potential new star. Studio chiefs are prepared to have work bungled if only it is a representative of the Aristocracy or Nobility who is bungling it.

This is a harmless human propensity while limited to playtime—but when it creeps into business hours and further handicaps the casting-director and the producer in their work, it becomes, together with the Curse of Nephews, part of the Mariner's dead albatross, to be cut loose as soon as possible.

In passing, it may be argued with justice that such snobbery re-acts favourably in the way of admitting to the industry such men as Anthony Asquith, whose keen brain and flashes of vision might never have secured him a footing in commercial film-production without his aristocratic connection. But such cases are rare, and snobbery does immeasurably more harm than good.

The solution of the problem of casting may be conveniently divided into three necessary steps:

(a) The establishment, by such production concerns as have the necessary capital, of "stock companies"—i.e., enough contract players to supply the chief characters of any normal story; but care must be taken to select the right stories, or, better still, to have stories specially written by authors specially trained.

(b) The elimination of Nephews, Snobbery, and Back-scratching—the three wicked fairies of the studio—and substitution of casting by reason of acting-merit, suitability, and, ultimately and ideally, type.



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(c) The training and encouragement of Kinists to cast their own films, within certain agreed salary-limits. The onus being on them to produce a good picture, they will have a correspondingly greater sense of responsibility.

Ultimately, though slowly, these conditions will come about. It will be a great day when we can say, with the Mariner:

“The albatross fell off, and sank  
Like lead into the sea.”

## CHAPTER V

### THE STAR SYSTEM

THE star system, designed to appeal to the romantic, was not the invention of romanticists. It was instituted by men who knew what they were doing—not theorists, but empiricists, who had learned their job in a school of hard knocks and painfully-acquired experience; and they made very few mistakes in their estimate of human nature and requirements.

We humans are interested mainly in ourselves and in each other. Apart from the scientists, who are concerned with the people of the past, the people of the future, and the people of other worlds, with what are most of us concerned but the people of our own earth and era?

The storytellers of ten thousand years have realised that, and the most engrossing tales are always about people—preferably people we know. They may dwell in strange lands, and have incredible adventures, but if they are the kind of people with whom we are familiar, and react in the manner in which *we* should react, they are acceptable to us.

The clever film-makers who were the predecessors of the modern production-committees and banking interests said to themselves: "The more convincing we can make these screen characters, the more popular they will become; they shall therefore have an existence off the screen as well as on," and they began to build up stars—

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players with whose general characteristics the public might grow familiar, and who could exist for the public in the flesh as well as in the shadow.

It worked. The "fan-mail" of the stars, running in some cases into hundreds of thousands of letters a year, can testify how well it worked.

With the star came the fan.

This word was originally borrowed from baseball slang, and was simply an abbreviation of "fanatic", to describe the enthusiastic supporter of a team or player. There is nothing opprobrious in its use; it denotes a filmgoer who takes a definite interest, sometimes extremely intelligent, either in films generally or, more usually, in some particular player.

The fan has two modes of expression. One is by applause in a cinema, the other by writing to the favoured star; and this latter practice has developed in America to such a degree that production executives actually gauge a player's popularity by the extent of his or her fan-mail—and with remarkable accuracy.

It is the duty and interest of the stars to represent in their own persons the predominant characteristics of the rôles they portray on the screen; not necessarily in the matter of morals, of course—it would be a little exacting to expect Edward G. Robinson or Paul Muni, for instance, to "racketeer" for the benefit of their fans—but general peculiarities.

To quote an extreme case, Greta Garbo is as mysterious and unattainable off the screen as on it, suggesting a reserve of intellectual power behind a frustrated sex-life. George Arliss is always the dignified English actor with the somewhat mordant sense of humour. Off-screen, Marie Dressler is a rather more refined edition of

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the rough-edged-tongue-and-heart-of-gold personality she always represents. Clara Bow and Lupe Velez are tempestuous (the former made the fatal mistake of overdoing it). Janet Gaynor is sweet, Clive Brook is impassive, Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., and Joan Crawford are married lovers. The glamour of the personality ascribed to the stars in private (!) life is as carefully preserved as is the integrity of the characters they portray. Body and soul, day and night, they belong to the public.

There are compensations, of course. They are paid fabulous salaries, on which they (or at any rate those of them who manage their affairs with as much perspicacity as a ten-year-old schoolgirl with a moneybox) could live in comfort for the rest of their lives.

Their fame far exceeds that of almost any statesman or scientist, soldier or sailor, philanthropist or poet. They dwell, chiefly, in the most perfect climate in the world, on the Californian coast, where everyone else is interested in their pet subject—films; and this is like offering a golf-maniac a home at St. Andrews.

They are—since the coming of speech to the screen—no mere automata, but are doing intelligent work in which they can excel largely by their own efforts.

To be sure, punctuality at work is rigorously insisted upon. Indulgence in sport is expected of them. Matrimony, repeated and varied, is almost obligatory. Foreign travel is a recognised part of their routine. The wearing of becoming clothes is a solemn rite.

But apart from these onerous duties, provided they keep within certain ill-defined limits of behaviour imposed by the industry itself for its own protection, they can, in their own phraseology, “do what they dam’ please.”

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So far the American star; and his English brother and sister—what of them?

Well, they are practically non-existent. The fringe of the star system, as understood by Hollywood, has hardly been touched in Bestwich.

True, there have been more or less definite attempts to build an almost infinitesimal number of British players up to what Hollywood loves to call "stellar rank". Betty Balfour, in the immediate post-war years, was a star. Jameson Thomas was at one time, before leaving Bestwich for Hollywood, within measurable distance of stardom. John Stuart and Mabel Poulton have both enjoyed such popularity as would have justified their being "starred", though I do not think either ever has been. Madeleine Carroll was actually starred in one film, *Fascination*—her last before her marriage and withdrawal from the screen.

Apart from these, we have no stars—and this will surprise a great many people who have been in the habit of loosely applying that label to any and every player of prominence.

A star, in the strict and official sense of the term, is a player who is adjudged of such importance as to warrant his or her name being displayed in larger type than the title of the picture—who, in box-office jargon, attracts more money than his vehicle.

Owing chiefly to lack of reserve capital, our players have not been built up to sufficient prominence to warrant their exploitation in this way. Certain names well known in the theatre will, as such, draw patronage to the cinema; indeed, you have probably often seen outside a cinema the name of a British player exhibited in larger type than the title of the film; but this is a

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purely local phenomenon, attributable to the manager's knowledge of what will please his particular clientele. For instance, the name of any such popular player as Sybil Thorndike, Henry Edwards, Godfrey Tearle, or Matheson Lang, who has toured stage-plays extensively throughout Britain, is certain to attract audiences to a cinema in any town where he or she has appeared. This, however, is not "starring" in the strict sense of the term, which can only be effected by the production company.

True, this misuse of the term "star" has been fostered by people who ought to know better. For instance, the publicity department of a British company, P.D.C., recently announced an almost unknown actress, Marilyn Mawn, as a "new British star". Miss Mawn might with perfect justification have been described as either "a potential star" or "a new leading lady"; such inexactitude is not merely confusing—it actually prejudices the player's chances, since a company's failure to star a girl whom it has thus described may easily be attributed to reconsideration of her merits.

One chief result of the star system is that, generally speaking, cinema-goers see an English film by accident, an American film because there is a star in it whom they want to see.

This interest in a star rather than in a story seems deplorable to those of us who insist that the play should be the thing; but human nature objects strongly to buying a pig in a poke; the public knows nothing about the capabilities of the teller of the story, the maker of the film—except in the case of an occasional foreigner such as René Clair—and rather than chance a story about which, in any case, they prefer not to know too much

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in advance, audiences place their trust in a star whom they know and like.

Astute producers realise this and profit by it by putting a star in the same type of film *ad infinitum*; but that is not to say that the story need necessarily be machine-made or poor entertainment. The fact that so many "starring vehicles" are utter rubbish is attributable to the laziness of their producers, who assume incorrectly that because a player is popular the audience will accept personality in lieu of adventure. This error soon changes *ad infinitum* into *ad nauseam*, and spells the premature fall of the star concerned.

What should be our national attitude towards the star system?

In both home and foreign markets, our British films go out to audiences who have been subjected to a long and intensive barrage of stars, and have learned to expect it; but filmgoers on both sides of the Atlantic are showing themselves increasingly willing to accept new stars—an exact antithesis of the star system.

Since a main plank in our platform of film-prosperity is the insinuation of our product into American first-run houses and throughout the important cinema circuits of U.S.A., our cast must, at any rate for the time being, contain star names. For this reason I welcome the influx of ready-made stars from Hollywood. Americans will pay to see, for instance, Roland Young, Leslie Howard, or Esther Ralston, even in a British film; and if in the same film we can sell them good direction, good settings, good camera-work, and a good story, we have a foot firmly planted in the enemy's camp.

*But . . .* we must be prepared for the change that is coming. Since the public will have stars, we must gradu-

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ally build up the names of star directors, or Kinists, upon whom we can absolutely rely to provide us with an interesting film, competently made; it is to *these* stars that we should hitch our wagon, lest we find it overturned in the ditch.



## CHAPTER VI

### AMERICAN STARS

No more pointed commentary on the efficacy of the star system is needed than your own familiarity with the names of stars.

If you are in the slightest degree interested in films (as you presumably are, having taken the trouble to buy, borrow, or steal this book) a dozen names of American players will leap to your mind.

Even if you are so ill-advised as to loathe and detest films—never having seen any—you can hardly avoid familiarity with a few such names. They are hurled at you from every hoarding, from the pages of your newspaper, from the fronts of Britain's 4,800 cinemas. You must needs be deaf, blind, and imbecile to avoid familiarity with the names of Charlie Chaplin, Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford, Ronald Colman. We need not be filmgoers to know them, any more than we need drink meat-extract or cocoa, shop in the West End of London, or wash, to be familiar with the names Bovril, Cadbury, Selfridge, Sunlight. And these, through advertisement—nowadays promoted to the dignity of Publicity, with occasional pretentious passes at Propaganda—have been established as part of our daily life.

But it is an axiom of advertising that you must lay an egg before you cackle, or you won't be believed next time; it would be no use screaming "Bovril" unless

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there were something pretty good in the brown jar. It is worth our while, therefore, to inquire briefly into the contents of the packages labelled Ronald Colman, Douglas Fairbanks, and so forth.

These four I have mentioned are an aristocracy. They form the core of United Artists, a kind of co-operative amalgamation of certain players and producers for their common profit. They have also been called the Big Four, but there are so many Big Fours, Fives, Sixes, and Sevens in every phase of life nowadays that the expression has lost its significance.

Douglas Fairbanks and his wife Mary Pickford are the traditional heads of the profession of film-acting. Their home in Hollywood, characteristically named Pickfair, is the Buckingham Palace—or rather perhaps the Sandringham—of Filmland. They are trembling on the verge of complete retirement from the screen, but it is one of the tragedies of the film-actor, in common with almost any other kind of public figure, that he never knows when to stop.

Neither does he know how far to emerge from the mists of glamour surrounding him, as witness the case of Charles Spencer Chaplin, who, by his antics among the nobility and aristocracy of England in the year 1931, lost much of his well-earned prestige. The public likes its clowns to be *intentionally* funny; unconscious humour does nothing to enhance the reputation of the humorist.

Nevertheless, the figure of Chaplin is an almost legendary one, and, while he adheres to his present programme of turning out one outstanding picture every few years, is likely to remain so. He has that aptitude for swift transition from tears to laughter, from laughter to tears, which characterises the work of William Shakespeare,

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Bret Harte, O. Henry, J. M. Barrie, James Stephens, and John Masefield, to mention at random a few of the Immortals, and this alone would place him among the great ones of the earth. Still, some of us who wish him well would rather he had stayed on Olympus.

Ronald Colman, another Englishman, is in a different category. His actual personality is so much like his screen-character that he need never fear personal contact with his fans.

But he does not desire it. He is the modest, devil-may-care, romantic, matter-of-fact, likeable fellow whom he represents in most of his films—a typical Englishman, inhibited by the Public School tradition and exhibited by clever production, direction, and story-telling (this last in the narrative, not the publicity, sense!).

A comparative failure as a stage-actor, he found that the screen with its infinite resources of device and artifice could exploit his personality far better than he could exploit it himself, and this is true of many others of those stars of silent days who have successfully weathered the talkie storm—and a great many who have not.

They are not great actors, the bulk of these stars whose names glitter against countless arcs of dark sky and have been adopted into a hundred different tongues. They are perhaps not even actors at all in the sense in which Henry Ainley and Marie Tempest, Emil Jannings and Conrad Veidt, George Arliss and Ruth Chatterton are actors—able to appreciate the degrees of human emotion and portray them in face and bearing: able to discern the essential peculiarities of a dozen different characters (not necessarily different in *appearance*) and assume them in turn so skilfully as to convince us that they *are* the character.

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They are, instead, people of such plastic adaptability that they can be moulded by clever direction into a semblance of emotional character; of such perfection of face, form, and physical movement that they can be photographed from any angle and in almost any attitude and still be pictorially pleasing; of such intelligence, force of character and determination to succeed as to take advantage of every foothold offered by the scarred and seamed face of the film-industry and climb to the top where others less gifted would have fallen headlong.

Of such calibre are the Colmans, the Brooks, the Bennetts, the Shearers, the Gaynors, the Farrells, the Chevaliers, and—though I be excommunicated for the heresy—the Novarros and the Garbos.

They are actors in the sense that they can do with a minimum of difficulty what they are told to do, and by that obedience supply us with infinite delight. They are all endowed with physical perfection, with a high degree of intelligence, with personal magnetism. If you told them that you did not consider them great actors they would probably (though privately) agree with you.

If you said the same thing to a gathering of their fans you would stand a good chance of being torn limb from limb.

Herein lies one great strength of the film industry. *It does not need great actors.* Its compensating weakness lies in the fact that it has hardly begun to realise this.

The need for great acting is always comparative, even in the theatre proper, for so much can be done by the use of artifice to supplement art.

An indifferent actor given a magnificent passage of Shakespeare to speak may be so rehearsed, so costumed, so lighted, and given so illusory a background that his

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delivery of the lines *must* be effective. A great actor, in proportion to his greatness, is able to dispense with the artifice and rely on his art.

The fact that we shall soon be able to do without them is not to be taken as a reflection on the value of the really great actors of the screen—of George Arliss, Ruth Chatterton, Frederick March, Lionel Barrymore, H. B. Warner, John Wray, Wallace Beery, Marie Dressler, Jacky Cooper. They have contributed invaluable to our entertainment and richly earned our gratitude and their share of our weekly tribute of one-and-threepence or so.

They kept the ship afloat when the Captains of Hollywood, mazed and bewildered by the sudden tempest of talkies, so far lost their heads as to cast overboard all their recently-acquired knowledge of cutting, tempo, montage, and the like. They brought to the screen (chiefly from the theatre, please note) a new prestige, as exponents of an almost forgotten art—the art of screen acting, as opposed to the art of being directed for the screen.

Once, many years ago, trained actors had filled the screen—but so badly were they treated by the camera that they crept back to the stage, hoping no one had noticed. Puppets subservient to direction took their place, enhanced by the art of cutting. And when the usurping microphone ousted for a while both direction and cutting, the actors returned to fill the breach—to find that the camera and the lighting were now so technically perfect as to do them justice.

While great acting is needed for the screen, these giants will remain; thereafter they will continue on the stage to fulfil their high destiny—of contributing enor-

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mously to the entertainment and recreation (in its literal sense) of their fellow-men.

In spite of my earnest wish that England may first—or next after Russia, Germany, and France—exploit fully the true principles of Cinema, I am inclined to believe that American stars will be the first to bow to this new decree and vanish almost overnight from the screen, because America always does things suddenly, after a long delay. She became Independent suddenly, she entered the War suddenly, she adopted Prohibition suddenly, she succumbed to Talkies suddenly.

She is almost ready to slough the Actor System (which with her is the Star System), as she is almost ready in her extremity to try anything; but she may not do it yet. Like the adoption of Colour, Wide Screen, Wide Film, Steroscopy, and Television the momentous step may be deferred until the industry shall have sufficiently recovered from the staggering shock of the talkies.

If that great concrete reservoir which overhangs Hollywood and whose cracks menace the film capital day and night were to burst and sweep away every star and featured player, there would be mourning in countless homes—but provided the directors, scenarists, cameramen, lighting experts, cutters and plant were spared, the true art of Cinema would make such rapid progress that within a year the public would be wondering why actors had been considered necessary at all.

Producers will not, naturally, let go for nothing their enormous vested interest in stars and featured players; therefore the star system will continue until one company, faced with an economic crisis, steals a march on the others as did Warner Brothers in the matter of talkies—and the stampede will begin.

## *The Actor*

We have no means of predicting accurately when this will be, and meanwhile the star system prevails, and will continue to flourish right up to the moment of its doom; but if you see a significance in the increase in the size of type used to display the name of the producer, the director, and the author . . . as the judge says to the jury, you may draw your own conclusions.

Exponents of certain auxiliary arts—dancing and singing—may be necessary to the screen longer than the actor, but even these will pass.

Let us not envy the Princes of the Earth in their bizarre Byzantine or Oriental or Tudor homes of Hollywood.

More than a mere concrete reservoir threatens them.

## CHAPTER VII

### BRITISH PLAYERS

BRITISH players, please note, not British stars, for, as we have seen, the latter could be disposed of in three lines, being chiefly remarkable for their non-existence.

There is obviously something wrong with British production that we should have this completely false sensation, when passing from the subject of Hollywood stars to the players of Bestwich, of a descent from the sublime to the ridiculous.

There is, in fact, a great deal that is wrong with Bestwich—but there is emphatically nothing wrong with British players.

We have, I stoutly maintain, the finest actors in the world, and they are practically all available for films, since the West End of London sits conveniently down in the very centre of Bestwich, ready to give of her best—not three or four days' journey distant as Broadway is from Hollywood.

That this array of talent will in time be superseded, as I predict, by skilful "kinism" and the employment of types, need not concern us for a moment.

It is essential to our national prestige and prosperity that the standing of Bestwich should at least approximate the standing of Hollywood.

To attain this it will be necessary for our film-makers to experiment, to accept and reject, to discard and



## *The Actor*

establish as the Russians and the Germans and the Americans do; but such research is costly, and we have not the necessary capital.

To acquire it, we must find a wider market for our film product. The British Empire may be won over to British films by tariff facilities, but Europe and America will be much more difficult to persuade—Europe because of the language bar, and America because her home-grown product is at present much more to her taste.

In this fight, while our Kinists and technicians are being trained to battle strength, our players must be our shock troops; it is important therefore to review these troops.

Like Hollywood, Bestwich drew on the stage for succour when the talkie wave smote her.

Just before the first "Mammy" song broke through a racked and throbbing screen, it had been my business to prepare a list of the twelve most prominent British screen players to be interviewed for a series of articles—six of each sex.

Here is my list:

Betty Balfour	John Stuart
Mabel Poulton	John Longden
Benita Hume	Stewart Rome
Madeleine Carroll	Jameson Thomas
Chili Bouchier	William Freshman
Norah Baring	Miles Mander

All but Chili Bouchier and Miles Mander were graduates from the stage, so might confidently have been expected to endure.

And what happened to them?

Betty Balfour had been, in the Welsh-Pearson *Squibs*

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series of Cockney films, the finest screen-proposition Britain had ever had; then she signed a long contract with British International and was killed stone-dead by a succession of quite unsuitable films such as *Champagne*, *Paradise*, and *Raise the Roof*.

Only one silent film—*The Vagabond Queen*—was a proper vehicle for her talents, and that came just in time to be smothered by talkies. At the expiry of her contract she assembled a unit of her own and made a talkie called *The Brat*, which was received with mixed feelings—warm affection for herself and cold indifference to the story. The indifference won.

Thereafter she retired—I had almost written “abdicated”—and deprived the British screen of one of its fondest hopes. Neither a great actress nor a raving beauty, she had a genius for comedy, a command of screen technique, and a head for business that should have spread her fame far beyond these shores. I greatly deplore the bungling that lost her to us.

Mabel Poulton is another victim of Bestwich’s astigmatism.

“Her voice,” they said, “is too Cockney—” oblivious of the fact that she had specialised in Cockney parts in silent films. She should have been brought back to the screen in Compton Mackenzie’s *Carnival* (directed at Welwyn by Anthony Asquith under the title *Dance, Pretty Lady*) and in Paramount’s *Down Our Street*.

Benita Hume has developed into a first-rate actress, and the mantle of Britain’s Most Glamorous Film Actress has slipped from Madeleine Carroll’s shapely shoulders to hers.

If Benita Hume continues to play in films made in Bestwich for American release, we shall soon have the



PLATE XII.

"BETTY BALFOUR, THE FINEST SCREEN PROPOSITION BRITAIN EVER  
HAD." A SCENE IN THE WEISSE-PEARSON FILM "SQUIR'S HONEYMOON."  
(See p. 220.)



## *The Actor*

thin end of the British wedge comfortably inserted between those too-United States.

Madeleine Carroll, the beautiful ex-school-mistress, suffered grievously, like most of the belles of Bestwick, from inadequate stories, direction, lighting, and photography. She has married a wealthy man, and has almost retired from the screen in favour of the stage.

Chili Bouchier, originally a kind of Kensington Clara Bow, was allowed to languish in obscurity for some time, and was then suddenly given a long contract by Herbert Wilcox, head of the British & Dominions Film Corporation, and rechristened Dorothy Bouchier. I regret the passing of Chili.

Norah Baring, whose keen sense of humour is belied by a tragic air, is rather difficult to supply with suitable rôles. She was exactly suited in Anthony Asquith's *Underground* and Alfred Hitchcock's *Murder*, but soon after this she declared herself dissatisfied with the whole business of films, and retired from the screen for family reasons—to wit, a son.

As for the men, John Stuart has since done excellent work in *Hindle Wakes*, *Men of Steel*, and *No. 17*; John Longden has floated his own private company and is directing; Stewart Rome plays "Charles, His Friend" parts that are quite incommensurate with his ability and experience; Jameson Thomas is still groping for a firm foothold in Hollywood, via the Los Angeles stage; William Freshman does an occasional film, varied with touring in sketches and management of his own theatrical touring company; and Miles Mander now directs, now plays, now writes, but always exhibits the ability which has made him for six or seven years a force to be reckoned with in the studios.

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Such were the "best bets" of 1928; and of them all, the only two names to conjure with to-day are Benita Hume and John Stuart.

Then who are our leading lights? The answer is, practically the whole personnel of the West End stage. One after another these tried and proved players have drifted in, some straight into leading rôles, some tentatively in small parts and "bits" to avoid the trouble and expense of a formal test; and nearly all of them, especially the seniors, have proved themselves to be of the utmost value to British production.

A few, it is true, are too "stagey" in manner to be really successful in the new medium, but the theatre too is leaving them behind; the way in which the majority of "old dogs" have learned "new tricks" commands my respectful admiration.

Such women as Ellis Jeffreys, Helen Haye, Athene Seyler, Isobel Elsom, Sydney Fairbrother, Barbara Gott, Mary Jerrold, Marie Ault, and Jean Cadell, such men as Cyril Maude, Edmund Gwenn, Gordon Harker, Herbert Marshall, Donald Calthrop, Owen Nares, Hugh Wakefield, Arthur Wontner, C. V. France, Henry Wenman, and O. B. Clarence, who have come to the new medium not with cupidity as to a rich field to be plundered but with humility as to a new technique to be acquired—these are our towers of strength at the moment.

In the younger field we are less fortunate, chiefly because our younger stage players are comparatively untrained. They do not nowadays "go through the mill" of repertory and provincial tours as their predecessors were obliged to do. Certainly the few who have done so—such as Elizabeth Allan, Joan Barry, Margot Grahame,



*Photographed by Lewis Protheroe.*

PEARL XIII.

A "SYMBOL-STILL." GORDON BARKER IN THE  
TWICKENHAM FILM "JACK O' LANTERN."





## *The Actor*

Moira Lind, and Dorothy Bartlam—are reaping the harvest of their laborious sowing; but they are too few.

If Bestwich were organised to find and train youngsters for the films, this temporary weakness of the stage would pass it by; what a pitiful confession for the great and flourishing film-industry to have to make—that it is so completely dependent on the impoverished and floundering theatre as to run more slowly when the machinery of the latter is out of order!

A few of our younger players—Anne Grey, Benita Hume, Jeanne Stewart, Muriel Angelus, Belle Chrystall, Heather Angel, Binnie Barnes, Kay Hammond, Anna Neagle—are doing excellent work which suggests that if they received such careful exploitation as they would in Hollywood (if, in fact, they were “groomed for stardom”) they could achieve world-popularity.

This is no idle guess. It is based on the fact that almost any English girl who has gone to Hollywood has appeared in films made there to far greater advantage than in any British film.

Evelyn Laye's is a case in point, Elissa Landi's is another, Jill Esmond's another, Sari Maritza's another. No wonder every British film girl casts longing glances towards Hollywood, where she would receive more than a fair chance.

She must be given at least a fair chance here, as Nora Swinburne was in Paramount's *These Charming People*, and as Elizabeth Allan was in the same company's *Service for Ladies*.

In the matter of young men we are infinitely worse off, for the generation born immediately before and during the war-years is faithfully reflected on the stage, to our embarrassment and discomfort.

## *Filmland in Ferment*

I am inclined to attribute this painful visitation of effeminacy to the fact that, owing to the absence on active service, and the deaths, of a generation of elder brothers there was no one at hand to administer the corrective kick in the pants which previous generations have found so salutary and invigorating.

Whatever the reason, the lamentable fact remains that the majority of young men one sees on the stage to-day are precious to the point of being intolerably ladylike.

A few honourable exceptions, such as Harry Wilcoxon, Hugh Williams, and Jack Hawkins come to my mind; but most of our more stalwart heroes—Lester Matthews, Richard Bird, Henry Kendall, Ian Hunter, Austin Trevor, James Raglan and the like—are no longer in the strictly juvenile class.

In the department of villains Bestwich is extremely well-off; to name a few at random, D. A. Clarke-Smith, Franklyn Bellamy, Harold Huth, Dino Galvani, Miles Mander, Garry Marsh, Wallace Jeffrey, and Abraham Sofaer are perfectly equipped between them to provide our screens with villainy in its most subtle, sinister, cynical, bland, brutal, treacherous, charming, or cruel forms.

We are as well provided in the matter of comedy, having Tom Walls and Ralph Lynn, Jack Hulbert and Cicely Courtneidge, Claud Hulbert, Sidney Howard, Frederick Bentley, Edmond Breon, Claude Allister, Reginald Gardiner, Clifford Heatherley, Ben Field, Alexander Field—the list could be far extended.

The vast majority of these names are names of the theatre; but there is nothing to be gained by keeping hopeful eyes turned towards the stage for our juvenile

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leads. Bestwich should be content to skim the cream of "heavies", character-actors, and comedians from the stage, and find a few girls and boys for itself.

At present our studios are relying on elder players to hold the interest of the audience by sheer power of acting ability, and giving the half-baked youngsters "twittering" parts which do not, after all, matter much if they are so badly played as to necessitate being cut out almost entirely.

But this will not do. Youth is interested in youth; youth fills our cinemas; youth will be served. The time will come soon when we must find the right boys and girls and put them on the screen in good stories well told—or fizzle out like a damp squib.

Certainly the stage must put its own house in order too; it will have to bestir itself before long and pay some attention to the matter of finding and training boys and girls, lest with the present generation the race of actors die out; but Bestwich cannot afford to wait for that to happen.

She has a house of her own to tend.

## CHAPTER VIII

### CONTINENTAL STARS

THE star system is in vogue on the Continent—which, for the purposes of this chapter, means Berlin, Paris, and Nice. Before the war it meant Turin. In a year or two it may mean Moscow, but I very much doubt it—not that I think the Muscovite principles of Cinema will be superseded, because I believe the whole world will have adopted them, or adapted them to its own needs.

Up to this present year 1932 the average British cinema-goer has seen few films other than American and British, and the Continental Cinema would not matter a Continental Damn to him were it not for certain monumental personalities such as Emil Jannings, Conrad Veidt, Fritz Lang, Brigitte Helm, Willy Fritsch, Lilian Harvey, Erik Charrell, Erich Pommer, Rex Ingram, Ernst Lubitsch, Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, Lil Dagover, Lili Damita, Olga Tchekowa, G. W. Pabst, F. W. Murnau, René Clair, and Edouard Greville; and of these names (three of them British) some may be quite unfamiliar to him, though he is reaping the harvest of their sowing every time he watches a film with any pretensions to good production, direction, acting, photography, lighting, or editing.

For most of us Jannings must tower, and continue to tower, above the rest, for he is a truly great actor—not merely in the sense of being able to hold our attention by personal magnetism or a vast repertoire of tricks of



PLATE XIV.

"FOR MOST OF US JANNINGS MUST TOWER ABOVE THE REST." THE GERMAN ACTOR IN THE WARDOUR FILM "THE BLUE ANGEL." (See p. 226.)



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gesture and expression and inflection, but in the possession of such deep appreciation of human nature, allied with a genius for mimicry, as enables him to assume other personalities, other nationalities, other ages than his own in such a manner as to be convincing.

*That* is the acting which has stood the talking screen in such good stead, and which I believe will be superseded by positive, constructive kinism.

Like Conrad Veidt (who perhaps most closely approximates his greatness), Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, and Lili Damita, he was swallowed up by Hollywood—to his detriment, for, like theirs, his genius was handicapped by poor stories and indifferent direction and all but smothered under elaborate and costly “hokum”.

Jannings and Veidt, however, alike had the good fortune to be disgorged by Hollywood on the plea of language difficulty when the talkies arrived, and to make their first talking films at home in Germany. We need only see these two actors in respectively *The Blue Angel* and *Congress Dances* to appreciate how each has recaptured the greatness of his performance in, for instance, *The Last Laugh* and *Waxworks*.

Greta Garbo has not been so fortunate, having acquired a sufficient knowledge of the American language to be retained in the film capital; Marlene Dietrich and Lili Damita, having made successful appearances in English versions of German talkies, were automatically absorbed into the Hollywood Moloch.

The random list of Continental personalities I have given consists exclusively of stars, although some of them are directors who have been elevated to stardom in that capacity—a phenomenon undreamed of in Hollywood and Bestwich, but inevitable in both.

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Assuming that you are the average filmgoer, how many Hollywood directors do you know by name? D. W. Griffith, Cecil B. DeMille, Lewis Milestone, King Vidor—or do you know him? Well, say three, then—three of the most spectacular. It is not fair to include such actors-turned-director as Erich von Stroheim and Ramon Novarro.

And in Bestwick? Alfred Hitchcock, perhaps—whom you possibly confuse with Raymond Hitchcock, the actor—and Anthony Asquith.

The reason why the names of German and French directors mean something to the public, at least of their own countries, is that these countries have realised increasingly the importance of direction.

The fullest application of this principle is reached in Russia, where practically the only important names in the film world are those of the Sovkino, or body governing the national production and distribution of films—all directors and producers.

The inference is obvious. If the Soviets did not recognise the director to be the creative artist in the Cinema, he would not be known by name either—for it is against Soviet principles to glorify the boss to the exclusion of the workers, unless that boss is himself a creator.

While the present actor-system endures, Germany will be in a strong position, for she is certainly well served by her actor-folk.

Although, or perhaps because, I have knocked about the world, I am not one of those who glorify “every age but this and every country but their own.” I would emphasise my opinion that the British stage-actor is nowhere surpassed to-day and has seldom been equalled.



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Nevertheless, the German actor is "plus a little something the Briton hasn't got". He is not necessarily better, but he is different.

Whenever I see German actors—on the stage, on the screen, in the studios, or in private life—I am aware of a concentrated force which threatens at any moment to leap into eruption, and is the very antithesis of the popularly-conceived Teutonic phlegm.

This sense of suppressed power, of leashed energy, is of terrific value in a dramatic scene itself, but is apt to militate against any gradual building-up to such a climax. The skilled English actor, ordinary, everyday, cool, and casual in unemotional scenes, establishes therein a sense of reality which by contrast makes his outbursts of emotion more potent. The English actor of to-day—not the florid and almost extinct actor-manager, nor the strutting effeminate, but the average workman—can mix with his fellow-men unrecognised; but not so the German actor, who either is selected for his air of bottled energy, or else acquires it—I am not sure which; perhaps a little of each.

The Russian stage-actor shares this quality; the Russian film-actor, as I have said, is almost non-existent.

The French, like the Americans, approximate more nearly to our principle, though they are naturally more volatile, more easily moved in their acting, as becomes the Gallic temperament. Indeed, the screen characters of every country but Germany seem to me to reflect the natural characteristics; in Germany alone the actor is different, a being apart.

This, however, is in itself the expression of a national trait. The vocations in Germany tend to be clearly marked, badged, docketed. The student wears a quasi-

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military uniform, the millionaire manufacturer wears square-toed boots, the musician has his hair long at the back and a black hat and cloak, the local dignitary sports a frock coat, the miner a blouse, and so on, and with such differences in costume come subtle physical distinctions. In unorganised England we all clap on our heads a felt hat, hard or soft, and are content to look alike.

Personally, I prefer my actor to be as impersonal as the man next me in the 'bus, to feel that he is even as I or my neighbour, and will react similarly to circumstances which might befall me. If he is obviously better equipped than myself and my friends for the battle of life, I may admire him but I lose a great deal of interest in his adventures. He will triumph against Fate, for the dice seem loaded in his favour. I cannot concern myself greatly in a horse-race in which I know one of the jockeys has a galvanic battery hidden in his breeches.

In other words, the English actor seems to me to depend upon being ordinary, the German actor on being extraordinary. As a matter of taste I prefer the former, and on grounds of principle also.

This discussion, by the way, may be germane to the cinema for another ten years, or for another year. I believe it will be much nearer the latter.

Naturally to most of us whose German is limited to *strafe, lager, Gott, kamerad, kaiser, and kindergarten*, the most interesting films from Germany are the modern productions containing the minimum of dialogue, and the more conventional "English versions".

These latter, being intended for the Transatlantic as well as the English market, are made with Teutonic thoroughness as well as it is possible to make them, with the aid of some of our first-rate actors. Players of the



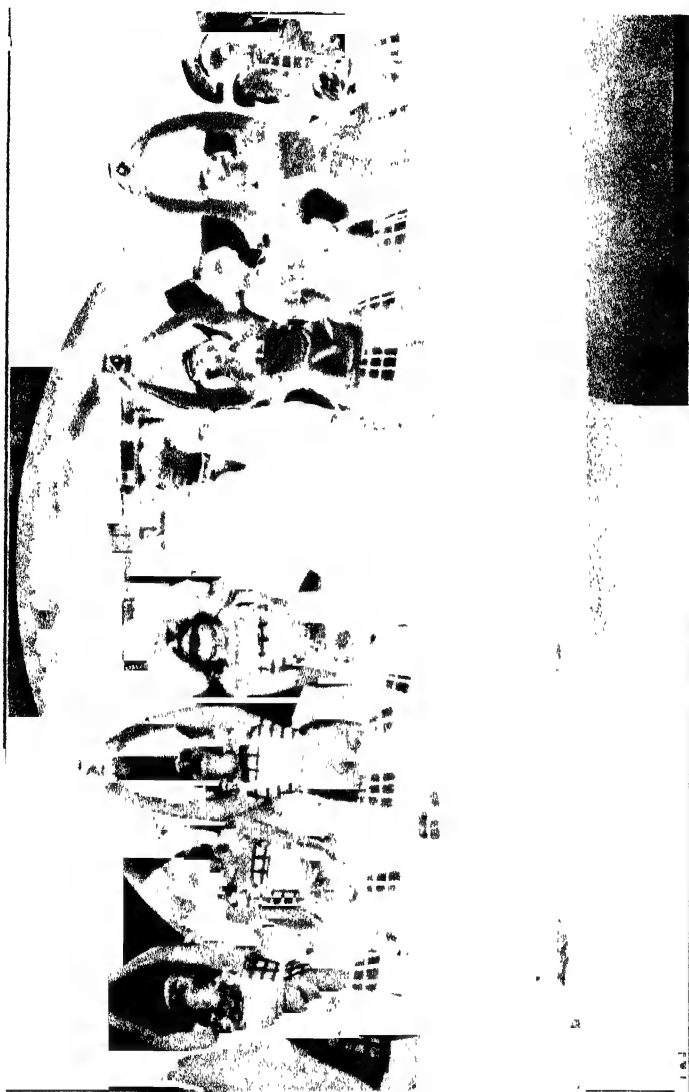


PLATE X.

"FILMS WHICH RUTHFULLY COMBINE REALITY AND FANTASY." JACK HILBERT  
IN A SCENE FROM THE GAINSBOROUGH FILM "LOVE ON WHEELS."

## *The Actor*

calibre of Helen Haye, Gibb MacLauchlin, Spencer Trevor, John Stuart, Robert English, and Robin Irvine habitually play in Berlin. A few, such as Lillian Harvey (who is trilingual) play in the German versions as well.

This intelligent attitude is in sharp contrast to that of Bestwick, which usually either scamps its foreign versions or concentrates thereon to the detriment of the British.

When British International made a German version of *Night Birds*, Herr Richard Eichberg was engaged to direct it, and a brilliant company was imported from Germany, including such players as Rudolf Kleine-Rogg (who played the capitalist in *Metropolis*) and Lotte Stein.

That film had an ovation in Germany. The British version, which was made concurrently, might have achieved equal success if the minor parts had been cast and directed with equal care. For example, the rôle filled in the German version by Lotte Stein was played in the English by a woman from the crowd, to whom was devoted far less time and trouble in direction than was given to the accomplished German actress who could have "done it on her head".

Germany, by the influence of *Congress Dances*, has lately had a profound effect on British production. The incidental employment of music as a background had been toyed with for some time, but that technically brilliant production confirmed the judgment of the more enlightened producers of Bestwick—and paved the way for *Sunshine Susie*, *Jack's the Boy*, *Love on Wheels*, and *Marry Me*—all films which combined reality and fantasy in the same blithe manner.

The conduit through which this German combination of melody and gaiety has come to Bestwick has its outlet in the slums of Islington, of all unlikely places. Michael

## *Film-land in Ferment*

Balcon, managing-director of Gainsborough Pictures, has amply justified his firm's telegraphic address of "Astuteness" by obtaining in co-operation minds so nicely blent of art and commerce as those of Herman Fellner, Wilhelm Thiele, and other Germans.

But in the wake of the German producer and the German technician is coming the German actor, and while welcoming him I hope devoutly that our players will not seek to imitate him, being better as they are.

As from Turin, from Nice much of the glory has departed.

Rex Ingram, the British Mohamedan actor-director-sculptor-mystic, has become a legendary figure . . . but we have not yet, as I write this, seen his talking film *Baroud*, in which he plays the leading rôle. It will be either an enormous success or a gigantic "flop", for that is the way of Rex Ingram.

For four films alone his name must endure—*The Four Horsemen*, *Mare Nostrum*, *Scaramouche*, and *The Three Passions*. He tackles big subjects in a big way, and withal in a universal way. Geographically he must class as a Continental star, albeit one who matters greatly to Britain, if only for his influence on the films of the immediate past.

The film of the future, I believe, lies in the hands of these stars of the Continent who are directors, rather than with those who are actors—but *only* if they stay in their own country or adjacent to it. Their danger lies in falling into the great melting-pot of Hollywood, whose product is almost indistinguishable hokum.

The prophet may not have so much honour in his own country, or nearly so much money, but he has influence. And that is apt to endure.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE CROWD

WRITING in this year of Enlightenment for a film periodical, Herbert Wilcox, head of the British & Dominion Film Corporation, delivered himself of the following pronunciamiento:

“The girl who wants to be a film-star should definitely break into movies via the crowd.”

Probably two hundred thousand people read that utterly misleading statement; I only hope as many will read this contradiction of it!

No more acute problem exists in Filmland to-day than that of the crowd, and none which has seemed to have as little hope of solution.

In Hollywood the circumstances are different from those of Bestwich, but no less grave. Let us examine them first.

Beautiful girls are attracted in thousands from all parts of the world to the Californian coast, by the lure of possible film-fame.

Now the Californian coast is a long journey from almost anywhere, and it costs a great deal of resolution, some effort, and a certain amount of money to make the journey.

Therefore the step of going to Hollywood is not one

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to be taken lightly or without due consideration; we may cheerfully gamble ten shillings in the Irish Sweep at odds of thousands to one against, but it is a very different matter to wager one's whole life at the same odds.

\* That, however, is what it amounts to. The girl who goes to Hollywood does not soon return, for her pride will not allow her to; and when she does throw up the sponge she is never the same again. The gamble which she has lost has taken toll of her youth, her beauty, her self-confidence, and very often her self-respect. Though she may very well have retained her virtue and her independence, she is nevertheless spoiled—not in the sense of being pampered but as a crumpled roseleaf is spoiled.

Thousands of these girls do not go home; they hang on grimly at any and every kind of job, hoping against hope and experience that they may catch the eye of a producer or casting-director, making spasmodic darts at crowd-work when a boom comes along, and cultivating each her real or fancied resemblance to some star, oblivious of the fact that only *one* of each kind ever reaches the top.

The motto of the Crowd is not *Experientia docet*, but *Nil Desperandum*.

The exact figures vary from year to year; but there is always a huge surplus, and behind the cold official statistics and estimates are thousands of stories of heart-break, of despair, pitifully concealed beneath a bitter pride.

Bestwich is in a better, and a worse, plight than Hollywood.

In better plight, because Bestwich is not so costly to reach, nor so difficult to leave. The girl who decides to "crash" Bestwich is not cut off from the rest of the world—at any rate physically. She does not come from





PLATE XVI

HOW IT IS DONE IN AN M.G.M. FILM IS DRIVING A HORSE-



## *The Actor*

abroad; her temporary home, and perhaps her permanent home, is London, where there is usually work or the dole to be had if she is stuck.

In worse plight, because it is fatally easy to get into the crowd in Bestwich. There is no great resolution necessary, no momentous decision to be made, no laboriously-amassed savings to be spent on the journey. Bestwich is at London's door; part of it lies within London's outstretched arms. You walk in.

However, once in, it is almost as difficult to leave as Hollywood is. A moral net encircles the crowd-girl, the crowd-man, from which only the strongest escape.

The reason is that a tiny, tiny corner of the mantle of glamour which enwraps the film-star falls upon the humblest member of the crowd. She is a film-artiste, she has (more or less) the freedom of the magic world of films, her eyes have gazed upon the mysteries. . . .

Her friends do not know that she has not mingled with stars and called directors by their pet names; that the guineas (less expenses and commission) which she has been paid for her day's work is her nett gain; that her importance in the scheme of things corresponds to that of a new scullery-maid at the Ritz; that, as far as she knows, she may never set foot inside a film-studio again in her life.

And she does not enlighten them, for the glamour is the most precious thing about it. The gilt very soon wears off the ginger-bread for *her*, but it must be kept on for the benefit of her friends. This pretence, which she practices until she herself is almost deceived by it, drives her to seek more film-work, keeps her out of regular and useful but apparently more humdrum employment, and lands her at last among the unemployables

## *Filmland in Ferment*

—restless, shiftless, hectic, insecure, as dangerous as a derelict on the high seas.

And, to vary the metaphor, from the moment she enters Bestwich she is as effectually marooned as is the crowd-girl in Hollywood who lacks the money for her fare home.

I hate to disillusion anyone, but I have set out to write the truth as I see it, and truth compels me to state that practically anyone who sufficiently desires it can get into a crowd in a studio *once*.

There is a reason for this. Directors dislike the idea of using recognisable faces in the background; casting-directors are therefore always on the look-out for new "types", and agents endeavour to supply them. As a rule the agent has a vast surplus of people on his books on which to draw, but every now and then an urgent call comes which catches him napping, and he sends to the studio anyone who happens to be sitting in his waiting-room at the time and is at all suitable. In fact, there are certain "old-timers" who make a practice of sitting about in agents' waiting-rooms all day and every day, in hopes of just such an "emergency call". Our little friend who wants to get on the films may happen to be there, she may be "picked", and . . . she is in Bestwich.

An old song says:

"When they asked me 'How did you become a soldier?' I replied 'I was standing at the corner of the street'."

For "soldier" and "corner of the street" substitute "film-extra" and "agent's waiting-room", and you have the truth about many of our "film-artistes", whose friends envy them and admire their achievements.

I have heard a woman whom I know to be otherwise

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quite normal say of a friend of hers: "Oh, isn't it splendid, So-and-so's working as a film-star at Elstree," whereas So-and-so had managed to obtain four days' work in a crowd of three hundred. Such vague and muddled thinking and loose phraseology are responsible for a great deal of the false glamour. If the Film Artistes' Guild were to change its name overnight to Film Extras' Guild, its membership would melt like the snows in Spring. The glamour, the prestige, the illusion—these constitute the bait that lures the ineffectual thousands to Bestwick as to Hollywood . . . and the hook that keeps them there.

I have said that this economic problem has seemed insoluble; in the light of recent developments, however, a simple solution appears.

We have seen that the film-actor is already in process of disappearance, and with him will depart the glamour.

As every soldier of Napoleon's army carried a marshal's baton in his knapsack, so every crowd-player carries a star's contract in his make-up box.

Abolish marshals, and the baton becomes a piece of painted wood. Do away with film-stars, and the contract is only useful for wiping the grimy ends of grease-paint sticks.

Nothing but the opportunity of sudden wealth, success, publicity, and power supplies the glamour of the film-studios. Remove that lure, and you would have only those few shiftless ones left in the crowd who are content to live from day to day, from guinea to guinea of "easy money".

This will not suit the producers' book at all. For one thing, they rely on the ambitious section of the crowd to provide a "smart" background—for only the men and women who are gambling on a chance of success in films

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will spend more money on clothes than they can hope to receive as "extras".

When the chance of advancement is gone, these people will go too—and the producer will be presented with the choice of paying his "smart" crowds at a higher rate, or else dressing them himself.

A certain well-known agent is said to have classified the "extras" on his books as V.S.M., S.M., and M., standing for Very Smart Men, Smart Men, and Men. If any of the "Smart Men" stay in the studios, this distinction may come to bear much the same significance as L. s. d., s. d., and d.

At any rate, psychologically the change in conditions will have a profound effect on "extras"—in this way, that whereas now a great many retired army and navy folk, Anglo-Indians, and the like who draw pocket-money from crowdwork have a fictitious justification in the fact that there are "chances of becoming a star", their position will be ruthlessly exposed when that chance utterly disappears. They must then either get out or declare themselves as highly-paid unskilled labourers in casual employment—which, in cold fact, most of them are to-day.

Put that way, "film-work" does not look so well . . . and there will no longer be an excuse for putting it any other way.

However, there will certainly be compensations. If the dignity (in the sense of worthiness) be stripped from the job of crowdwork, the producers will have to offer some other attraction in the way of more regular work or better conditions.

For the producer wants his crowd. The new type of film will demand "atmosphere" even more than the old;

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and it is very much to the advantage of the producer to have on supply a crowd whose component members are studio-trained—who understand studio-routine, are easy to handle, have learned the unwritten laws of the studio, and have developed “camera-sense”; the latter is simply an instinctive feeling of where the camera is, and bears about the same relation to “film-acting” as a farthing dip does to a million-candle-power “sun”.

In Hollywood it has even been the practice in hard times, when crowdwork was scarce, to call larger crowds than were necessary and to vary their personnel as much as possible, so as to renew hope in a maximum number of people and ensure their being still there when really wanted.

This may seem heartless, but film-producers cannot afford the luxury of a soft heart; and it seems to point the moral that the producer dare not let his crowd melt away.

It may be argued, of course, and with justice, that once the “crowds” left Hollywood it would be a tough proposition to get them back when needed, whereas Bestwick has London at her studio-door, and could have 100,000 people to-morrow if she desired them—which Heaven forbid!

But they would not be “studio-broken”; they would be novices, and nuisances on that account; it is greatly to the advantage of the producer to have regular crowd-people, who can be more or less trusted to do the right things in the background with the minimum of attention, while the director concentrates on his more important characters.

Paradoxical as it may seem, I feel that the very change which makes crowdwork a dead-end will also

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simplify it for the crowd-people, because when the ambitious people are removed and there is no longer more than one status of film-work, it will be possible to organise the extra to the extent of introducing the "closed shop".

Producers, I anticipate, will gladly agree to a limitation of the number of crowd-people available, for with the better organisation which I have foreshadowed in an earlier chapter the practice of using crowd-people for "bits" will disappear altogether, and no such risks will be taken as failing to have the right people engaged in advance, even for the tiniest cameo.

The efficient director will engage extras purely as "atmosphere", and will not allow them to obtrude; the growing practice of having the "crowd" in soft focus will minimise the danger of faces being recognisable; and crowdwork will be a definite business, like mannequin-work, offering no bright future but a reasonable chance of a decent living.

However, neither now nor then does the road to success lie through the crowd, as Mr. Wilcox suggests. He has given one crowd-girl, Evelyn Bostock, a chance to become an actress, in *Thark*. Other producers have given other crowd-girls a chance, and the film-world has marvelled thereat, but these stray swallows do not make even an English Summer—and when the film-industry is rationalised the chances of ordinary Miss Extra becoming Miss Extraordinary will be more remote than ever.



## CHAPTER X

### THE FUTURE OF THE ACTOR AND THE ACTOR OF THE FUTURE

TWENTY-FOUR and a half centuries ago, Thespis of Icaria in Attica is said to have introduced acting as an entertainment instead of the ritual it had previously been; and laymen began to take the place of priests as actors.

Since then the actor, even when he modelled his conduct so closely on that of the royal court as to earn the official designation of "rogue and vagabond", has been regarded rather as the priest of a cult—with a certain awe, a certain curiosity, through a certain glamour not widely different from the glamour of priesthood.

Two and a half thousand years is a long time. A tree as old as that must have its roots very deep, and it seems extremely unlikely that the popular regard for actors, as a class or individually, will materially change.

I have tried to show that the screen-actor cannot endure as such; but he has been an ephemeral creature at best. In approximately twenty-five centuries of acting he has lived for twenty-five years. There was no acting to be done by the earlier "film-actors"; they ran after one another, they tumbled down, they grimaced and rode on bicycles and on horseback and indeed did anything that might furnish the *motion* upon which the

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interest in motion-pictures depended; but as to exercising any skill in portraying human emotion—this was simply not required of them. And when the novelty of animation had worn off, and producers saw the necessity of telling a story, the practised players of the stage were called in; and with the additional advantage of voice the film began, especially in the Provinces, to take the place of the stage to such an extent that the Theatre to-day is in a very parlous condition.

The Theatre does not come within the scope of this book except insofar as those players are affected who will vanish from the screen; but I claim justification for examining the position and future prospects of the Drama, since Drama is Drama whether on stage, screen, or printed page.

I predict an enormous revival in the theatre proper.

It is fashionable to say that the Theatre is dead, whereas it is really only moribund in the Provinces and very ill in London. The heart which has beaten for twenty-five centuries will not stop beating because a rival has taken the field and proved more to the public's taste for a mere two or three years.

Two main causes have led to the present depression in the Theatre—one peculiar to the West End of London, the other to the Provinces.

The West End has suffered from the pernicious system of sub-letting and re-sub-letting theatres at continually higher rentals until the manager is paying a sum vastly in excess of what the owner receives. This is sheer middleman profiteering, and is responsible for much of the present deplorable state of affairs, inasmuch as only those wealthy syndicates or individuals who can afford to risk losing a great deal of money are in a position to

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undertake production at all; whereas the men and women of original ideas, who are the life's blood of the Theatre, have usually very little money indeed, being artists rather than business-people.

However, already there is a movement to solve this problem by giving more performances a day in order to reduce the enormous overhead expenses; and new theatres are continually being built which, though conforming to the prevailing high rentals, do not suffer from repeated sub-letting and will therefore be able to bring their rentals down with a run when an increase in the general prosperity justifies it.

The talkies, with their luxurious theatres and low prices, have furnished a strong opposition and made theatre-going an expensive pastime by comparison. But when the theatre-people return to their proper element, there will be such a rush to see them that it will be possible to charge prices for a comfortable seat which will bear comparison with those in a cinema.

The public will always want its actors, its flesh-and-blood deities. When they are no longer required for the screen, and become in the studios a mere costly luxury, they will be welcomed back to the theatre, and I predict that the very financiers who have been exploiting them (I use the term in no reproachful sense) on the screen will exploit them on the stage. Already, as I write, the boom in continuous theatre-performances in the West End has behind it more than one prominent personality of the film world.

Adequate capital, and such effective publicity as has laid the foundation of film-prosperity, will go a very long way towards re-establishing the Theatre as a vital force in the life of the nation.

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In the Provinces I expect an even more marked effect.

What has been the root cause of the terrible condition into which the Theatre has fallen, outside London?

It is all very well to blame the competition of talkies, but the rot set in long before *Sonny Boy* did. It first became apparent to the careful observer when the old race of actor-managers—the Irvings, the Trees, the Alexanders, the Wallers, the Terrys—died out; to protect their own interests and to form an adequate background for themselves, if for no more lofty reason, they would only form their companies of adequate actors.

Nowadays, when the man who sends out the company sits in an office in Shaftesbury Avenue and merely tots up the losses, any jumped-up twopenny-ha'p'ny novice or dug-out "has-been" is considered good enough to entertain Doncaster or Winchester, Lincoln or Wells, Llandudno or Dumfries. He must be cheap, but there seems to be no other essential qualification. And the good sensible people from John o' Groats to Land's End decline to be fobbed off with such fustian, and very properly go to the pictures instead.

But—here is the flickering pulse-beat that tells us the patient is alive—when by chance a popular player, such as Matheson Lang or Sybil Thorndike, *does* go out to the Provinces with an adequate company, he or she receives an ovation. The people love, no less than they ever did, an artist who can move them to mingled mirth and tears.

One cannot blame our West End players for cleaving to their West End, where at least there is a *chance* of success, and where they may at any performance be

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seen by a film-producer who will offer them a screen contract at a salary several times fatter than that they are receiving in the theatre. There is no temptation to make cheerless cross-country journeys to dismal and remote manufacturing towns, to play to sparse audiences in dingy theatres, whose abominable dressing-rooms are only a shade less habitable than the horrible theatrical lodgings they have to endure.

But when the haven of film-work is denied them, they will be glad to take on any kind of a job. I anticipate a very unpleasant and chaotic period of readjustment, whose degree of intensity will depend upon whether the change-over from a starlit to a star-less screen is effected quickly or slowly.

Most things happen quickly in Filmland, when they at last make up their minds to happen at all; but for the sake of my very many actor friends I hope this will happen slowly, for otherwise the resultant chaos and hardship will be distressing; gradually, however, the real people of the Theatre will be re-absorbed into it, while the twitterers who have temporarily filled their places must find other employment.

The repercussions of the change, in the world of the Theatre, must be extensive. First and foremost, it will send out into the towns and villages of England those men and women of genius who have raised the level of English acting to its present high standard—men and women who are capable of maintaining our interest and upholding a situation for exactly the right period with unerring certainty—men and women who know well how to sweep their artistic fingers along our heartstrings and elicit therefrom such music as the high gods love.

They will win back the allegiance of the people to that

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great national, though happily unnationalised, institution, the Theatre, and a great revival of interest in the drama will sweep through the country and result in the establishment of community drama centres, of Little Theatres occupied by amateurs between the frequent visits of first-class professional companies; of theatres in which it is possible to sit for two hours without suffering the tortures of the damned from draughts, fleas, or cramp. . . .

Proper organisation of theatre circuits will do away with the nightmare theatrical Sunday—the dreary journey from Durham to Bath, and back to Newcastle the following week-end.

The powerful “fan clubs” will follow their favourites into the Theatre, and the Fan Press will in time do likewise. Stars will be made, new gods will be raised and adored; new playwrights will receive adequate presentation for their work; the Theatre, when it goes a-journeying, will no longer leave its brains in Town. A large number of what America dubs “ham actors”—the half-baked juveniles who have been drifting round the Provinces of late—will find themselves out of work, but these will gradually be re-absorbed into the theatre in minor rôles, and will have a chance to learn their business from masters.

That the public wishes to see its divinities in the flesh is apparent from the unexpected success of stage presentations in cinemas, and especially of the more recently-instituted “potted musical comedies”.

“Personal appearances”, too, enjoy unbated popularity. They have been considered injudicious for the indigenous film-actor who has had no stage-training, but the stage-actor who has become popular in films has

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nothing to lose and everything to gain by appearing before his admirers in person, and it goes to prove that the audience likes its gods to descend from the mountain-top and do a little affable patronising now and again.

Further proof of this lies in the fan-club dances, at which the members meet to adore the film-stars present, and in the crowd round the stage-door when a popular player emerges after a theatrical first-night.

The public wants always to get a little closer to its divinities; and if, without an unconscionable difference in the cost, it can see them across the footlights it will do so—especially in the small, intimate theatre; and especially when it can no longer see them on the screen.

And the actors themselves? I meet a great many of them continually in the studio, and I know hardly one who would not welcome a revival in the theatre proper. They make a brave show of liking this strange, tyrannical business which has all but deprived them of their regular livelihood and pays them so handsomely by way of compensation; but they miss, more than it is expedient for them to admit for publication, the warm human contact with their audiences—the great wide sea of faces which is waiting beyond the footlights to sicken them with apprehension and intoxicate them with excitement—to inspire them and thrill them, and raise them, even for a brief moment, to an ecstasy of interpretation, to unimagined heights of communion with their fellow-man.

That is what they are bitterly regretting when they glance restlessly round the group of studio technicians and carpenters and admit pathetically: "Of course, one misses the audience . . ."

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An actor requires inspiration; more, he requires continuity—a warming-up to an emotional scene.

A little while ago I met a celebrated character-actor who had been playing continuously in films for a couple of years and had just made a brief return to the stage.

"I tell you, E.G.," he said, "it's awful! The audience is still there, and the flats and the flies and the floats—but there's something wrong. *Every time I get to the end of a line I find myself waiting for the word 'Cut'!*"

No, I feel that the actor, as a high-priest of Drama, will not lose by being squeezed off the screen—except perhaps for a while financially, but I have hardly ever met an actor who had the slightest financial sense, anyway—and will even gain considerably by the theatrical renaissance that is to come.

I do not anticipate a long succession of spectacular stage-productions, such as *White Horse Inn* and *Casanova*, which the screen can do better; rather will the boom come in the intimate theatre, where the audience feels itself close to the Mysteries.

And there the fine actor, so long an exile, will return to his kingdom and the hearts of his people.



### PART III. THE AUDIENCE



## CHAPTER I

### WHAT DO WE WANT?

You and I—the Audience—are the most important feature of this Filmland. The whole structure of film-production will stand or fall by our favour or disfavour. If we stop going to the cinema, not all the organising ability of the film-magnates, not all the bolstering of the banking interests, not all the art of the artists or the technique of the technicians can keep Humpty Dumpty from falling headlong and being irreparably broken.

We, not the arrogant stars whom we humbly, dumbly worship, are the real gods of Filmland.

How do we exercise our power? The fact is that we don't. We merely go to the cinema, twice weekly, or once monthly, or once in three years, according to our habit; and, in many cases, only habit keeps us going there at all.

We have, in general, no means of manifesting our pleasure or displeasure at a film. In the theatre proper we can clap, stamp, cheer, catcall, hiss, boo, throw tomatoes, and have a wonderful time; but what satisfaction is there in giving the bird to a shadow, the razzberry to an electrically-driven projector? None.

Nor does it help matters to get up and go out in disgust, for someone else slips gratefully into our seat, and the manager coffers two two-and-fourpences instead of one.

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It has been said that a nation gets the government it deserves. It certainly gets the films it deserves; if it doesn't rise up and deserve good ones by agitating for them, it gets rubbish.

I do not believe that the dictum with which Dame Melba is credited (or debited), "Sing 'em muck—it's all they can understand", can fairly be applied to film-production. The producers and exhibitors who continue to "show 'em muck" after repeated warnings are riding for a very serious fall.

What do we, the Public, want?

We are divided in our views, as is rather to be expected when one considers that there are eight million of us in Great Britain alone—that is, eight million filmgoers *every week*.

Some of us want stars—but do we want them to the exclusion of everything else?

I believe those of us who are loyal to a favourite player have been cheated so often with a poor story or a shoddy production that our loyalty is beginning to waver.

Here is one of the chief weaknesses of the star system; it is possible to sell to the public a star's name and face alone, without a pennyworth of acting, because there is no story to act. That is why I believe a player such as George Arliss will survive a host of others on the screen. He is in a sufficiently strong position to be able to veto a poor or unsuitable story, and a sufficiently experienced man of the theatre to know when a story is poor or unsuitable. When we queue-up at the box-office under a banner with the name George Arliss across it, we *know* that we shall not merely see George Arliss, but watch an enthralling story unfolded, in which he has ample opportunities for acting.

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The greatest enemy of films is not the Nonconformist preacher in Aberdeen who preaches against them and writes long and regular letters to the papers denouncing them. It is to be found gnawing, like a worm i'th' bud, at the very heart of Filmiland; and its name is Hokum.

You have heard of hokum; it came, like wooden nutmegs, real-estate booms, and Kentucky colonels, from beyond the Atlantic. O. Henry, who knew, would have called it a graft; and he would have known better than to exploit it after it was played out.

It is nearly played out now, and should have been years ago; but it is difficult to stop peddling gold bricks while there are still buyers, even though the earlier purchasers are beginning to take an embarrassing interest in the quality of the gold.

Hokum is a subtle way of cheating the public. It consists of the deliberate introduction of extraneous matter into a story in order to "get it over"; a kind of mental dope.

The producer takes a story which, having presumably been written by someone who knows his or her job, is logical, and if not precisely credible, at least reasonable, and puts it into production.

But he distrusts his public. "They won't stand for a simple story," he argues. "They're used to cabaret scenes; we must have a cabaret scene. But they're too used to ordinary cabaret scenes, so we must have our cabaret in some unusual place—a submerged submarine, or the roof-garden of the Bank of England. And Gainsborough did well with *Sunshine Susie*, so we must have a few songs and dances. And the hero, instead of being a young law student, had better be a young scientist perfecting a deathray to make England supreme in warfare

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—*Cavalcade* was a success, so patriotism *must* be good box-office.

"*Then*," he says, "there's a chance that the public may fall for it"—or, in plain English, be swindled into liking it.

Are we—the majority of us—really such nitwits that we can't appreciate a story told with sincerity, clarity, and dramatic force? Must we really have the tale adorned with all these irrelevant titbits, which have proved successful in previous and utterly different films from which they were culled?

A production company whose motto is "Titbits for Nitwits" appears to me to be gravely misjudging its public.

By all means let us have inspiration in the method of production, of presentation. When *Twelfth Night* was produced recently with music and with its entire setting and costuming in black and white, upon which polychrome lighting was cunningly employed, no one could have suggested that the innovation detracted from the effect of Shakespeare's comedy. Instead it lent it a new loveliness and distinction, which amazed us elder ones who thought we knew everything the play had to offer us, and opened the youngsters' eyes to the glorious living possibilities of this playwright whom they had thought dead.

But if acrobatic dancing had been introduced, as it was in the Witches' Scene in *Macbeth* some years ago, we should have been vaguely offended; it would not have "belonged".

The producers have an argument which suffices them. They say: "People want all kinds of elements in their films—gravity and gaiety, charm and cheer, passion

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and pomp, roguery and revelry, romance and reality, heroism and happiness."

True—in their films; but not necessarily all in one film, irrespective of congruity. The film in which all these elements can be reconciled into a harmonious whole is an ideal film—and it will be recognised and appreciated as such.

Meanwhile, a little homogeneity, please! Producers act as if every production is their last (as it frequently deserves to be) and they have to bung into it everything they can think of, without discrimination or restraint. The poet who is writing a sonnet does not slip into the middle of it an anapæstic heptameter because he has just thought of a good one, nor does he couch his ballad in sonnet form because his rival has just successfully published a sonnet.

I appreciate the producer's problem. He knows his public pretty well; if he buys a gloomy play—as he often does—because it has had a West End success, he has a mental vision of a boy and girl spending their Saturday night at the pictures, or paterfamilias, spouse, and offspring paying their weekly visit, and says: "This'll depress them; we'll have to make it more lively. Change the ending. Introduce a circus scene, or a bathing carnival. Pep it up, see?"

Thus is Hokum born; the producer, to cover his own idiocy in buying the story at all, cheats his public with a makeshift. It is not enough for him to plead that the public wants to be cheated. That is the plea of the man who peddles gold bricks.

There is, of course, a solution, as there must be to every problem. It lies as much with the distributor and with the exhibitor as with the producer, and it can only

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be reached by co-operation. The West End of London has found it, but the quest must not stop there. It must spread throughout the country, throughout the world, if filmgoers are to be supplied with the *kind* of entertainment they desire.

The solution lies in cinema specialisation. Anyone who has ever visited a cinema to see a particular drama which he has been eagerly anticipating, and has wasted an hour and a half first in sitting through two short comedies, a newsreel, and a "publicity" film, will understand and agree with me.

A theatre-manager who prefaced a heavy historical drama with a jolly, cheeky, little modern curtain-raiser would be considered as qualifying for Hanwell. He would be deliberately putting his audience in the wrong key, necessitating a complete change of mood, when the curtain rose on the main business of the evening. Yet no one is surprised when the cinema-manager does this every week of his life.

"But the audience must have both kinds of entertainment, grave and gay," he repeats solemnly after the producers. Agreed—but not necessarily in the same evening. Not necessarily in the same theatre. In the words which G. K. Chesterton put into the mouth of Noah: "I don't care where the water goes if it doesn't get into the wine."

The skipping young cinema has so far outstripped the plodding old theatre in popular favour that it believes there is nothing to be learned from the latter; but one prominent feature of the heyday of the Theatre in England was specialisation.

In London, people booked blindly for the Haymarket, Drury Lane, St. James's, the Vaudeville, knowing the



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kind of entertainment their money would buy at each. In the Provinces, the names of Sir George Alexander, Sir Charles Hawtrey, Wilson Barrett, Matheson Lang, Fred Terry, were a sure indication of the type of play being presented. Theatres specialised, actor-managers specialised . . . and theatregoers knew where they were.

A few West End theatres such as the Aldwych and the Gaiety, that have stuck to this policy, are gathering the reward of prudence, while others lament their lost audiences.

The cinema can follow suit, West End cinemas which specialise in newsreels, in unusual films, in Continental films, in films of the macabre have reaped a golden harvest. Why not have cinemas devoted to drama, to comedy, to farce?

I believe producers could help by making their feature films longer—to run for two hours. Twenty-five years ago it would have been unthinkable for a film to run for more than seven or eight minutes. In two or three years from now it may seem incredible that films ever ran for the odd times of eighty minutes—neither an evening's entertainment nor an accessory to it.

I look forward to a time, and that soon, when the great body of filmgoers will visit a cinema to see a certain film of which they have read or heard, or because they know that particular cinema provides the kind of entertainment for which they are in the mood. Two first-rate though sombre British films, *Cape Forlorn* and *The Two Worlds*, failed because they were presented without warning as an evening's entertainment in places where people were accustomed to song-and-leg shows.

I hope people will bring as much fore-knowledge, judgment, and taste in choosing a film as they now do in

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buying a book. Then we shall have a filmgoing public which has authority; which is vocal; which stands no damn nonsense.

Then filmgoing will become a contribution to the Art of Life, like theatregoing, reading, dancing, and conversation, instead of merely a clumsy device for passing a dull evening; and we shall be the richer for the change.

## CHAPTER II

### BANGING THE DRUM

IN this third part of our book, dealing with audiences, it is proper to consider the link between ourselves and film-production—the publicity department.

There is a very vague and wavering frontier-line between the departments of Advertising and Publicity. Actually they are identical, but for some occult reason (not unconnected with Caste) the distinction is preserved, and even emphasised.

For instance, the head of the publicity department of a certain Hollywood studio bears the pompous title of Public Relations Adviser. However, it is only one syllable from Adviser back to Advertiser, and that short step may be taken at any moment.

In any case, whatever it chooses to call itself, it is the department which tells the world about the company, its films, its stars, and its other personalities. Its work is called advertisement when the department pays for publication of such matter, publicity when it is published gratis for its news or interest value.

But these sub-divisions overlap considerably on a shadowy borderland.

The old dictum concerning advertisement—"The business man who doesn't advertise is like the man in blue glasses who winks at a pretty girl in the 'bus; *he* knows what he's doing, but no one else does"—is as

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true of film-production as of any other business. The public must be told; the question is how, and what?

Film publicity may be divided conveniently into two parts—production publicity, which deals with every aspect of the film during production, and is, or should be, conducted by an expert on the “floor”, and presentation publicity, which takes care of the film from its completed state until the end of its life—which end, under modern storage and handling conditions, never comes.

Let us consider these parts in order, beginning with the vexed question of studio publicity.

It has always been a matter for debate how much publicity is desirable before the film is ready for presentation, or rather how *intimate* such publicity should be.

Films are now a fashionable news-subject, but of the five kinds of publication interested in film-production—the National, the Provincial, the Trade, the Society, and the Fan Press—only the last-named sends its representatives regularly to the studios; the others are content to receive publicity “dope” sent out by the company, which they water down or ginger up to suit their individual requirements.

The fan papers—represented in England mainly by four weekly magazines, “Film Pictorial”, “Film Weekly”, “Picturegoer”, and “Picture Show”—require a considerable amount of production-news and gossip for their columns, which can only be satisfactorily obtained by visiting the studios; and this is where the trouble begins.

Film studios are ticklish places to visit. Production is carried out under extremely trying conditions—over-

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heated atmospheres, lack of organisation, clash of temperaments, clash of intention, and enormous overhead expenses, threatening at any moment to fall and overwhelm the profits.

Therefore it is essential that production be not further hampered by avoidable interruption; and the delicate task of the publicity-man is to give the visiting press-representative every possible facility for obtaining his or her "story" and ensuring as far as possible that it is the right story, and at the same time prevent him or her from getting in the way.

The success of his efforts must depend largely on the visitor's studio-sense, which is generally only acquired by experience. Hereby is created a vicious circle, for studio-correspondents of fan papers are continually changing as a result of friction in the studio, and inexperienced new ones, even with the best intentions, cause further friction.

It happens this way. A journalist, totally unaccustomed to the ways of the studio, is sent down to gather production-gossip. He is naturally over-awed by the strange atmosphere, and, anxious not to do the wrong thing, keeps well in the background, entirely at the mercy of the studio publicity-man, who tells him as much or as little as he thinks fit. The journalist returns with confused impressions and very little copy, and is roundly abused by his editor, who points out that he has collected nothing which is not sent out in the official studio "dope" or news-bulletin; and as it has come from the same source (the publicity-man), this must obviously be true.

On his next visit, therefore, the journalist recklessly "butts in" everywhere to obtain an original story-angle,

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and makes a nuisance of himself thereby; and from that time onward he is a marked man—sometimes banned from the studio, but more often admitted under silent protest.

Publicity is the life's blood of the film-actor, the artist, and the technician, and therefore no one in the studio can afford to snub the journalist; but it is grossly unfair to expect anyone to make weighty utterances for publication during odd moments snatched from film-work, when everyone's mind is on the difficulties of the next scene. Ill-considered remarks are made, half-hinted admissions under cross-examination are misinterpreted and misreported, and an "interview" is published which has little foundation on fact and no sanction from anyone concerned, and results in everyone being rubbed up the wrong way.

Obviously only the system can be blamed for this; it is not the reporters' fault if he has to get a story and has no idea of publicity values; and it is only on the tacit understanding that the published report *will* have publicity value that the interview is granted at all. News value and publicity value are two very different things, of which the former may be most damaging to the person concerned.

If journalists are to be allowed into the studios at all, it should be on the distinct and definite understanding that they are the guests of the company, whose hospitality must not be abused. With this principle established, it should not be necessary for the publicity-man to watch visitors like a cat with a mouse, lest they get the wrong story.

For one thing, it is almost impossible for him to do so. He may be called away to the telephone, and the visitor

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is then at the mercy of anyone with a nose for publicity and not too much modesty to go after it.

If, in the studio gossip columns of a magazine, you see publicity accorded to a make-up man, you may be practically certain that the writer is new to the studios. The make-up man has rather more time hanging on his hands than any other technician, and, as I have explained, is frequently an ex-actor who fully appreciates the value of having his name in print. He therefore lies in wait for the unwary journalist, volunteers information about the production, and innocently directs the conversation to his own record and attributes. The victim, in gratitude for his help, publishes a paragraph or two about him—which has no bearing at all on the subject he or she has come to report—and the make-up man's appetite for publicity is whetted rather than appeased thereby.

I have in the studios a great many friends, from directors to message-boys, and including electricians, make-up men, art-directors, script-girls, firemen, dialogue-writers, "props", carpenters, and commissionaires, who go out of their way to supply me with information which they know will make good "copy", without any possible advantage to themselves; but I shudder to think of the chaos which would ensue if I used such information injudiciously and indiscriminately. I should be swamped with libel-actions and banned from every studio in England.

The representatives of the National Press—the leading daily and Sunday papers—do not often visit the studios, for the sufficient reason that they are film critics, whose painful duty it is to "knock", or criticise adversely, the product of the studios, and it might be embarrassing to meet a player or a director whose work one has just slated

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unmercifully; besides, their readers do not demand intimate gossip about British players.

I wish, however, that our film critics were better acquainted with the conditions of studio production, for a proper understanding of the difficulties would enable them more justly to apportion praise or blame. When production is on a proper footing—when the day of the Kinist has dawned—the responsibility will be the Kinist's, and the praise or the blame will be his also; meanwhile it might be anybody's, and only intimate knowledge of the particular studio's internal politics can qualify a critic to say "This actress over-acted; this cameraman under-lit his scenes; this director can't cast a film for toffee." The actress may have been browbeaten into over-acting; the cameraman may have been denied the necessary amperage to light his scenes; the director may have had his cast wished on to him; but the tin can has been tied to each one's tail, and is very difficult to shake off.

In Hollywood the problem has been solved by rigidly excluding journalists from the studios, except such as are of sufficient importance to be classed as distinguished visitors. Sons of famous men, who have embraced journalism as a last resort, and best-selling novelists who "journalise" as a sideline, fall into this category; the ordinary gossip-writer and paragraphist may be taken to the studios by a star's press-agent, but does not visit the "floor"; he sees the star in her dressing-room, but never watches her working.

However, in Hollywood the stars foregather when off duty—at the popular restaurant, roadhouse, speak-easy or other resort of the moment—and the scribe who knows the ropes can meet them there. In Bestwick the leading



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players rather shun each other when off duty, and have their own circles of friends; and unless you know them intimately it is difficult to run them to earth.

In addition to the publicity furnished by the studio, many players and a few directors have their own personal publicity, furnished by a press-agent whom they pay themselves. With a few exceptions, such as that which placed Madeleine Carroll on a pinnacle of fame, this is money thrown away, for the payment is seldom based on results. If it were, it would amount to about two-pence a week, whereas it is more frequently about three or four pounds. However, the victim keeps on paying this sum rather than quarrel with a press-agent, for it is a bad thing to have enemies, and a press-agent is potentially a deadly enemy.

On the other hand, the press-agent will argue that exacting payment from a star for services rendered is like drawing blood from a stone. The star can only afford luxuries, and publicity ranks as a necessity.

The whole question of studio publicity is as much in need of rationalisation as any other aspect of film-making and -selling. In some studios there is no one at all to deal with the visiting journalist. In others the publicity-man divides his time between the studios and the West End office, and seems to be in neither when he is wanted; an honourable few companies have a highly-efficient man or woman on the spot, who knows what the visitor should see, which journalist should be allowed to wander round unwatched, and which will raise Cain if allowed off the lead for a moment; and such efficient organisation brings its own reward, for, with the best intentions in the world, the journalist cannot help being biassed in favour of the studio where he has been treated hospitably.

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Personally I deplore the avid appetite for intimate details of stars' private lives which is a feature of the age.

It is not confined to films or stage. Judges, musicians, scribes, politicians, debutantes, artists, pathologists, crooks—all come under this public microscope. What they eat, what they drink, whom they marry, when and why they divorce, what they wear next their skin, whether their pet pomeranian likes truffles or little biscuits with pink icing—all this is "news" to the great reading public to-day, and it all has to be discovered, or manufactured, and duly published.

In the theatre this absurdity, like many practices which are carried to excess, is based on a reasonable principle. When we see a great artist on the stage, we are naturally interested in the influences which have produced this genius. We inquire into his childhood, to discover whether his talent was encouraged. We follow him into his private life to ascertain, if we can, how much of himself he puts into a part and how much is pure simulation.

But the modern interest in the private lives of players has no such justification, for the tendency is to build up a player's reputation on his private life *rather* than on his public performance. Public interest is canvassed for, and fostered in, people who have hardly been seen on the screen, or who at any rate have not given a performance capable of attracting wide public attention. In a word, the silver wrapping has become more important than the quality of its contents; and this largely accounts for the leaping into fame of many young players who have appeared in one part which did not tax their powers over-severely.

One ill-effect of this system, and a root-evil of the

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star system, is to make the player of more importance than the character played. I know practically nothing about Edward Chapman, except that he is an unusually clever actor; therefore when I see him on the screen I am solely interested in Cap'n Boyle, or Tilly's brother Perce, or whatever character he is impersonating; similarly with George Arliss, Edmund Gwenn, and a dozen others of the older school, whose wine needs no bush. But when I watch Madeleine Carroll, however well she is playing the part I am principally aware that the lady is a B.A. of Birmingham, was once a school-teacher in Brighton, chucked it up to go on the stage, chucked that up to go on the films, had her publicity built up with great skill and assiduity, married a wealthy man, and chucked the screen because she didn't get quite the right parts. The illusion is *nil*.

Our players should be, to us, interpreters of the characters they are playing. Once off the stage or on the screen they should be of no more interest to us than our grocer is in his private moments—or, even if we are interested, we should for our own enjoyment of their work refrain from spoiling the illusion.

A Janet Gaynor must always be a Janet Gaynor, because her public knows that in every moment of her life she is just a Janet Gaynor; except for this, she might have become an actress.

This injudicious and restricting type of publicity will vanish from Filmland with the disappearance of the star and the restoration of the story; it has never been necessary in the theatre proper; and indeed, even the Law and Medicine could get along very nicely without it . . . though what would the press-agents and gossip-writers do then, poor things?

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There is evidence that they are gradually building up a little publicity for themselves and each other, presumably against that dread day when they will have to live by taking in each other's washing.

I expect production-publicity to disappear entirely under the coming regime of Kinism. With the logical development of the use of scenario-"tricks", it will become even less advisable for the illusion to be shattered by exposure of studio methods. Besides, with the employment of "types" in place of actors it will be necessary to have all possible seclusion during production, in order to concentrate attention on the Kinist's directions, and to prevent any self-consciousness on the part of the player. Even now, some directors have told me they dislike people visiting their set because their players immediately begin to over-act; the effect of an audience on "types" unused to being the centre of interest may be even more demoralising.

The scope of the presentation-publicity department is limited to drawing world-wide attention to the excellence of the completed film, and this it usually does all too well, drawing attention to excellences which do not, in fact, exist.

The principle of film-publicity is exactly the same as that of the man with the drum outside the fair-booth, who originated it. It's no use banging the drum and shouting: "Colossal, stupendous, unparalleled epic!" unless you have something above the ordinary to exhibit. Some day the publicity-chiefs will realise this, and adjectives may once again mean something. At present they are a debased currency, bulky to handle and with hardly any purchasing-power at all.

## CHAPTER III

### MRS. GRUNDY ON GUARD

BETWEEN us, the audience, and the film we come to see stands a doughty defender of our morals; the British Board of Film Censors.

I am against censorship in general; but I consider, nevertheless, that the film industry is in sore need of a kind of censorship.

This apparent paradox is defensible. I am equally against capital punishment and surgical operations—but I do not wish to see them abolished until the ills with which they contend are removed.

It is with the functions and limitations of the Censor rather than with his office that I pick my quarrel; and I hope to see even the office itself removed before I have grown too old to enjoy my filmgoing—or to have my pleasure cut in half by the Censor's scissors.

To become historical for a moment: nearly twenty years ago the British film industry, threatened with a Government censorship similar to that which the Lord Chamberlain has for many years exercised over plays, compromised by appointing as its own private paid Censor an ex-official of the Lord Chamberlain's office, a Mr. Redford. His job was to see that the industry did not get itself into bad odour with authority and necessitate the imposition of a Government censorship.

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The various holders of the post, including the late T. P. O'Connor and the present holder, the Hon. Edward Shortt, have acquitted themselves admirably, considering the anomalies and limitations of their function.

But the conditions are wrong. For example, just as the Lord Chamberlain cannot read a play with a view to licensing it until a theatre is leased and the arrangements made for production, so the British Board of Film Censors (whom I am calling "the Censor" for convenience) cannot witness a film with a view to licensing it until it is finally edited and ready for public exhibition.

Thus if a subject is *tabu*, the play or the film automatically goes on to the shelf until public opinion (which the Censor is supposed to represent) becomes more liberal-minded; for you obviously cannot change the whole subject; and I declare this point as a battle-ground, because I hold that *no* subject should be *tabu*; but I will withhold my attack on the ethics of censorship until we have considered its practicability.

Supposing it is only certain words or lines, or a scene, to which the Censor objects. In the case of a play, an able playwright can usually make deft readjustments that will convey his meaning as clearly but with less possibility of offence; and all is well. But remember that the play is considered by the Censor *before* the work of production is undertaken, the film *after*.

By the time the Censor suggests alterations or modifications in the latter, the leading man may be in Berlin, the leading lady *en route* for Hollywood, the director on the Riviera, the producer in the Bankruptcy Court, the set, in which the scene occurs, demolished.

There is no chance of re-making—nothing to be done but to cut; and since with a talkie it is impossible to cut

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the picture without cutting the dialogue as well, and *vice versa*, the result is as misleading and as bewildering as though a page or two of a novel were either "blacked out" or destroyed altogether. If the latter, one has no idea where the gap occurred and is unable to reconstruct the story; if the former, the imagination runs riot and pictures scenes probably far more lurid than those that were excised.

Some time ago I was shown furtively a most amusing booklet illustrating this particular peril of censorship, which had evidently been printed privately but which deserves a wide circulation. It contains only well-known nursery-rhymes, of which certain entirely innocent words and phrases have been "blacked-out", suggesting by implication the most scandalous alternatives, and imparting a richly Rabelaisian flavour to the whole. Perhaps it was suppressed by censorship—but every censor should be provided with a copy, for a warning and a sign.

Is a censorship of films in England really necessary? The avowed design of the Censor is not to improve public morals, but to keep them from growing any worse than they are.

*Would* they grow any worse, if left alone? The advocates of censorship point warningly at those obscure little cinemas in Paris and other American resorts, to which the unwary tourist is occasionally lured (to his invariable regret) by sallow and dubious individuals with shifty eyes in the shadow of long-peaked caps.

But the very fact that such cinemas *are* obscure and in back streets, when almost anything might be shown with impunity anywhere, suggests that the disease is local and uncontagious. We are more prone to blush

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than our neighbours across the Channel—but are we more moral? It is a moot point.

Even supposing there *were* little cinemas in the back streets of Rotherhithe showing filth to seamen, would England fall? If seamen want filth they know where to get it; the fact that so many of them frequent the decent pubs and mission-halls is an indication that the danger is not grave of the might of our Empire being undermined in *this* particular way.

Supposing even family-life Lambeth were thus demoralised—as I don't believe for a moment it ever would be, for all the tendencies are in the opposite direction—would the rot spread upward through the whole fabric of society?

Experience has taught us otherwise—that the moral tone of a nation, a family, a community, is set from the top, not the bottom. We are most apt to ape our "betters". When Courts have been profligate, nations have become debauched. The strict moral standards of England in the last century are well called Victorian, for it was the Head of the State who set them; and while our Royal Family continues in its present high standard of conduct and demeanour, the nation stands in no need of Mrs. Grundy's admonishing umbrella.

In the words of a famous character-actor whose speech is better known for vigour than for reticence: "While Queen Mary wears those hats, bless her heart, we'll all be pure."

It is a very debatable matter how far films affect conduct. It is the fashion among the less prominent of our dispensers of justice to blame visits to the cinema when a ruffian of eight years comes up before them charged with stealing two water-pistols and enough



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peppermint bull's-eyes for a three days' siege; and considering that any child with a parent stupid enough to take him can see any film in any cinema, it would be amazing if a few hungry little minds did not devour indigestible ideas.

If the Censor were not a creature of the film-industry he could do a good job of work by forbidding absolutely the admission of juveniles, whether accompanied by adults or not, to cinemas where "A" films (that is, films prescribed for adults only) are being shown. But this would limit film-going, since many parents have nowhere to leave their children; so the humanitarian cry is raised: "Why grudge the poor mother her recreation?" and the situation (as it affects the box-office) is saved.

To suggest, however, that crime films induce crime, sexual passion films induce sexual passion, and so on, is, in my considered opinion, bunkum. There was a spirited attempt to connect the recent insurrection at Dartmoor with the M.-G.-M. film *The Big House*. The whole moral of that film, however, was that rebellious convicts, however well-organised and well-led, cannot prevail against the might of the Law, and that the convict who turns hero and helps the warders in the fight is the one who comes off best; and both these contentions, I beg leave to point out, were proved true at Dartmoor.

But to return to my chosen battleground—the Censor's authority to veto subjects, coupled with the necessity of glossing-over several subjects which *are* permitted. I hold this responsible for the poverty of ideas in our films as compared with our stage-plays.

If a man has anything to tell his fellow-men, he writes a book or a play, or paints a picture or composes a piece of music; he does not write a film-story. Films, declare

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the pundits solemnly, are for entertainment—quite oblivious of the fact that one of the most fascinating forms of entertainment and recreation is the absorption of ideas.

This recreation, however, is almost denied the film-goer. If a vital subject is introduced in film-form (as it should be), the story must not reach its logical conclusion. To appease the Censor it must be rendered "respectable" with a packet of laundry gloss and a happy ending.

This quality in our films is the real social disease—a kind of intellectual drug-taking which is no less harmful for being amusing and pleasant.

Our stage (or what is left of it) discusses, frankly and fearlessly, the problems of the day; but does anyone suggest that the theatre audience is demoralised?—is less moral and healthy-minded than the film-public?

The Censor has made a curious exception in favour of Continental films. They may go, for some recondite reason, deeper into the heart of a subject than the home-grown or American product may: perhaps because most of us cannot understand what the characters are talking about.

But even these are not always free from the red-herring trails by which our films are ruined and rendered footling. Let me take as an instance the much-discussed and highly successful German film, *Mädchen in Uniform*.

This purports, at the outset, to be a study of the problems of a girl's school in Germany, run on quasi-military lines—the effect of physical and mental repression, the attempt to crush by tyrannical discipline the tendencies to homo-affection and heroine-worship which we know to be common in girls' schools.

This is a strong theme, and a worthy one; the fact

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that it has been attempted in a film at all reflects credit on the producers and has re-awakened in a large section of the public, which had almost given up hope of them, an interest in films as vehicles of ideas.

The story is most arrestingly told, partly because "types" are used instead of actresses to impersonate the children. Unfortunately this admirable practice has not been followed in the case of the sympathetic mistress who is the object of the heroine-worship. An actress who has long played blue-eyed heroines was selected for this rôle—whether as a contrast to the more forbidding mistresses or whether to provide a little sex-interest I don't pretend to know; but the result is disastrous. By alternately encouraging and repelling the pent-up sexual feeling of one of the girls she brings her to disgrace and drives her to the point of suicide . . . and completely befogs the original theme in which our interest has been enlisted—the effect of the school system.

This alluring mistress is no part of the system; she is foreign to the theme; she is introduced merely as a beautiful sympathiser with the girls and an object of their worship on that account, and is then inexplicably revealed as a *deliberate* encourager of homo-sexual sentiment. However, we are invited to continue to admire her. She is, in fact, Hokum.

In the end, she leaves the school in protest against the way the girls are treated—and I cannot help thinking it is as well for the school that she does return to the haunts of *men*.

This is a subtle form of hokum—the kind that is introduced for sensationalism or "to make it more interesting", and entirely disorganises the theme, yet not so violently as to make the film appear totally ridiculous.

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Many intelligent people have hailed this picture as a worthy and sincere attempt to deal with a grave problem; others have expressed to me their deep disappointment that the real problem should be sidetracked in favour of another, equally important but equally neglected in the film. And a whisper went round London that a Lesbian film had somehow got past the Censor, and the prurient tumbled over each other to see it, almost to the exclusion of the school-teachers and social workers to whom a solution of the problem, or even light on it, would have been manna from Heaven.

Had the film not been represented as dealing constructively with the genuine and general problems of life in a girls' school, it is safe to assume that the Censor would not have approved its public exhibition. In other words, the problem-story served the purpose of "selling" the film to the Censor, while the homo-sex-hokum served the purpose of "selling" the film to the Public; and both Censor and Public were cheated.

Were it possible for the Censor to wage war on Hokum, I would support his office with all my might. He should be empowered to descend on such a film as *Mädchen in Uniform* and say: "This sex-matter, thus introduced, is *not germane to the theme*. Make the film over again, leaving it out. Treat of both problems in one film, if you will, but only if you can do it logically. Say what you believe; I'll stand for it, and the public will stand for it, But don't drag in erotic misfits to make the film 'box-office', or you shan't be allowed to make films at all."

That would be a Censor worth having.

## CHAPTER IV

### BREAKING DOWN THE BARRIERS

For twenty years, Cinema laboured to break down the barriers of nationality; the whole world enjoyed in common that touch of Nature which makes it kin; and the better understanding thus established between the nations did more for world-peace than a dozen polyglot Conferences and Conventions.

In the twinkling of an eye, however, those accidental barriers sub-dividing mankind were restored by the introduction of the talking film, for, though speech is universal, language is national.

*Speech is universal, language is national.* Therefore the problem confronting those producers who aim (from whatever motive) at a world-market must be to utilise this condition of universality, speech, in such a way as to avoid the limitations imposed by language.

I have already referred to the experiment of ungrasped dialogue—the effect of hearing characters speaking without the necessity of troubling to distinguish what they are saying.

This principle, properly exploited, will go far towards solving the problem of speech, for it connotes the employment of dialogue *only* when related to action, and has the effect of adding the conviction of aural-appeal to the precious speed of the silent film.

But why, it is pertinent to ask, should we lose the sig-

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nificance of words on the screen? The answer is that we need not; but its use will be evolutionary, not imposed.

It has been hoped in certain quarters that the coming of the dialogue film might establish firmly some universal language, such as Esperanto; and certainly the Esperanto Congress at Oxford in 1930 missed a great opportunity for propaganda by not arranging the production of a talking film of a "popular" type with its dialogue entirely in Esperanto; but we can look more confidently to Evolution.

Action, contrary to popular belief, is by no means universal; yet, by force of usage, it is tending to become so.

In a remark made to me recently, Harry Hughes, one of the most consistently interesting members of our younger school of British directors, expressed the matter with admirable lucidity.

"When we first saw in a film an American turning back the lapel of his jacket, did we understand the action? No. But when we see it now, whether we be British, Czech, or Malayan, we know that he is showing the shield-shaped badge which proclaims him to be a police-officer. The action, through usage, has passed into the international currency of ideas. Why shouldn't words do the same?"

Why, indeed? Imagine a scene in which a woman sits alone in a room; a knock is heard at the door; the woman speaks; a man enters, and the woman's demeanour is such that we know the man's entrance meets with her approval. Problem: what has she said?

To a Briton in the audience she has said "Come in!" to an American "Come!" to a Frenchman "*Entrez!*" to

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a German "*Herein!*" to a Spaniard "*Adelante!*" to an Italian "*Entrate!*" Yet they have all heard the same word, in whatever language it was spoken; and the principle of which this is an elementary example may in time establish an understanding of foreign words and phrases in ordinary use. This will come about automatically, without effort, for the action will explain the words; but when such words are sufficiently widely understood, as the Jap and the Eskimo now understand "Oh, yeah?", they will be absorbed into the international currency of ideas, the world-medium of exchange.

Meanwhile it is important, if our films are to have an international appeal, to adopt a universal standpoint. We are already becoming international in our filmgoing; the least linguistic among us speak glibly and affectionately of *Soolaytwa Deparry* and *Anoola Libertay*; we must also become international in our film-making.

America succeeds in depicting America, and especially the West, because she is applying the appropriate mentality to the task. She fails, as a rule, in depicting Europe or Asia or Africa, because she brings to bear upon them a mentality uncompromisingly American. The obvious exceptions, such as the films of Lubitsch, are the work of foreigners who refuse to brook American interference.

Humour is universal; drama is universal; music is universal; pathos, hate, love, lust, the glow of friendship, the thrill of speed, the flush of victory, the chill of despair—all these are part of the international currency, *if viewed from an international standpoint*; and as a step towards the attainment of that standpoint I welcome the flow of American, German, French, Hungarian, Italian, and Russian blood into our studios, just as I welcome the temporary migration of British artists and

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technicians to Hollywood and Neubabelsberg, to Joinville and Nice.

I make one stipulation, however; the immigrant to our studios must understand our language and make himself understood in it. Far too much time is wasted in film-production already without the necessity for clumsy resort to an interpreter as well. Our painful and mainly abortive attempts to make multi-lingual films, if they have taught us nothing else, must have taught us that.

We are a patriotic race; that is to say, we stand up rather self-consciously for "God Save the King" and buy British goods if they are better and no dearer than foreign, and pay our income tax when it is due if we are specially asked to.

But we shall be making a great mistake if we accept British films merely because they are British; this will inevitably lead to an ill-founded complacency and a slackening of effort; let us remember that the label "British" is only a recommendation abroad when experience has shown that the goods thus labelled are of superlative quality. We do not buy Swiss-made gloves because Swiss watches and condensed milk are good and cheap; why should Switzerland buy British films because our gloves are the best obtainable?

The error into which patriotism may lead us is illustrated by the wide commendation given recently to a British film, *Men Like These*, which undertook to portray the experience and behaviour of a British submarine crew in peace-time, imprisoned in a vessel which had been accidentally rammed and sunk by a tramp-steamer.

This film departed so far from probability as to give us



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heroics for heroism. Thus the commander exhorted his men to "Be British!" (not, as I almost expected, to *buy* British), whereupon the men sang "Tipperary" and gave a lifelike imitation of film-actors standing up to the armpits in cold water in a studio tank. . . .

In fact, the main object of the film appeared to be to advertise a certain life-saving apparatus, which, although doubtless excellent, has received quite sufficient publicity without being specified here.

Unfortunately for the chances of this film achieving more than a patriotic success, a Hollywood-made picture had reached England shortly before, called *Men Without Women*, which portrayed the experience and behaviour of an American submarine crew in peace-time, imprisoned in a vessel which had been accidentally rammed and sunk by a tramp-steamer.

In this the characters were flesh-and-blood; in the other they were bombast and bunting.

Good Old Britain and the Dear Old Flag are excellent levers for getting people into the trenches in war-time; but they will not do much towards getting even our own people into the cinemas in peace-time—much less the foreigner with a flag of his own to wave.

## CHAPTER V

### THE HIGH, THE MIDDLE, AND THE LOW

THERE is a peculiar impertinence in the use of the terms "Highbrow" and "Lowbrow" as ordinarily applied to filmgoers—a totally artificial and misleading description which connotes on the one side snobbery and on the other side brutality.

It postulates, also, a kind of declaration of taste; a fixity of outlook; a definite classification. The Highbrow likes highbrow films, the Lowbrow likes lowbrow films, and that's that!—and that matter being satisfactorily settled, the great and worthy Middlebrow public (of which everyone considers himself a member) can forget about them both and go to the pictures.

It used to be said of the Middle Class in England in the reign of Queen Victoria that nobody ever belonged to it. Now we nearly all belong to it, and are glad to be able to belong to anything; and the same applies to the great Middlebrow Class of filmgoers. There are few who care to be found outside it.

The fact is that we are nearly all catholic in our tastes. There are times when we like what old Kipps called "a simple chune", and there are times when we are attuned to the Melody of the Spheres. In either case, and in the whole gamut of moods between, we are likely to find the entertainment we need, in books or paintings or music or football or greyhound-racing . . . or films.

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No one has any right to criticise us; no one, fortunately, to dictate our choice. The Highbrow may sneer (considering himself to be middlebrow and us lowbrow) and the Lowbrow may jeer (conceiving himself to be middlebrow and us highbrow); and between the sneers and the jeers we carry on serenely, taking our films as we take our books and music and Sabbath—as made for Man, not Man for them.

But there *are* Highbrows and Lowbrows, and, just to make quite sure that we are neither, let us examine them in turn.

The Highbrows are definitely prejudicial to the interests of filmgoers in general. In themselves they are inoffensive enough. They form a little coterie, they think it is shocking to have something else to do on Sundays than attend the Film Society's shows, they use the handy, though alien, word *montage* when they mean editing or cutting, and they wear black hats.

I like all that. It is picturesque. But I object strongly to their assumption of a proprietary interest in the metaphysics of Cinema—the assumption that only members of the Black Hat Brigade, precious, obscure, a trifle erotic, may pretend to any knowledge of film-production as an art rather than as an industry.

This is why I hold the Highbrow to be inimical to the best interests of Cinema; for no one who is not a Highbrow wants to be mistaken for one, and the ordinary filmgoer would rather dissemble his interest in something better than the trash which the ordinary cinema provides, than run the risk of being mistaken for a Highbrow. Personally, I don't care twopence; I frequently wear a black hat, and I air my loftiest views on films quite openly and shamelessly; but I resent the fact that dis-

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cussion of the Art of Cinema should stamp anyone as a crank.

It is not, I insist, such discussion or such interest that makes the Highbrow; it is his assumption of superiority to the common herd of filmgoers, his scornful ignorance of the ordinary filmgoer's requirements, his lofty contempt for the commercial side of film-making (though obviously commerce has supplied his hat), and the abstruse jargon with which he endeavours to conceal his paucity of ideas.

The Middlebrow vaguely realises this, but he is afraid that other Middlebrows may not. I receive, in the ordinary course of my business as a film journalist, a large number of letters from filmgoers who would like to see films containing, let us say, more fundamental verity; and almost every letter either begins with: "I hope you won't think me a highbrow" or ends with: "I'm afraid this sounds rather highbrow." Why should it? Simply because the Highbrows have arrogated to themselves the right to discuss Films as an Art, as distinct from Films as a Saturday Evening.

This state of affairs is absurd and preposterous; that so few people take a serious view of films is bad enough, but that those few should conceal their interest or abandon it altogether for fear of being regarded as highbrow is infinitely worse.

That is my case against Highbrowism.

The chosen organ of the Highbrows is a quarterly publication called "Close Up", published in Switzerland, which, although at times so erudite as to be almost incomprehensible (even to Highbrows), bears few of the marks of Highbrowism. I like to read it through when I have a fortnight to spare, not only because I usually find something interesting about film-making, but also because the

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occasional juxtaposition of queer words is so unusual as positively to challenge solution, in the manner of a cross-word puzzle—and all mental exercise is stimulating and strengthening. Here is a passage from the review of a new book:

“The creative minus in cinematography and its limitation to certain means of expression, serve as the foundation of Arnheim’s deductions. He confronts the corporeal with its effect in two-dimensional planes, the diminution of depth in relation to space appears to be just as great a factor of composition as is the absence of colour and the use of intentional lighting; the limitation of the size of the frame and the variability of object distance are balanced in respect of their significance, as also is the lack of continuity in time and space and the lack of a non-optical sensory world.”

Reading that, I assume that the writer meant *something*, and I am interested to know whether I can discover what it was.

Insofar as the Highbrow can influence production for good, I commend him—but I fear it is little; inasmuch as he is a symbol of the snobbery of progress, I condemn him as a stumbling-block.

The Lowbrow is a much more unpleasant animal, though, curiously, less dangerous.

His principal manifestation is loud and offensive derision of anything on the screen that seems to him to savour of romance, or purity, or idealism. He wears a cloth cap instead of a black hat, it is true, but he is just as indifferent to the ordinary filmgoer’s requirements and just as scornful of the ordinary commercial film, as the

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Highbrow is. His criticism is more assertive, it comes from below instead of above, it is reactionary in spirit, and it is even less constructive than the Highbrow's; but he is just as much a misfit as the Highbrow is.

The Lowbrow chiefly infests the East End cinemas, whose audiences are inured to him; he also crops up in country cinemas, but, being readily identified as "blacksmith's boy" or "that lad o' Brown's" he is easily suppressed; in certain University towns he has rendered family filmgoing impracticable, but to undergraduates any symptom of yahooism is (for some occult reason) forgiven.

The Lowbrow is so obviously a person of mean intelligence that the ordinary filmgoer is not afraid of being mistaken for one; and his very opposition to intelligent films is their recommendation, to everyone who realises his state of savagery.

The Lowbrow in the film-studio is an anomaly in that he defeats his own ends. I know certain studios practically the whole of whose output bears the cloven hoof-mark of the yahoo, but such product fails commercially, and the yahoo will ultimately find himself compelled either to study the requirements of civilisation or to apply his peculiar talents to some more suitable cause, such as the peddling of obscene postcards.

There is another, and more problematical, type of Lowbrowism, existing in any place containing uneducated and unenlightened peoples; it is no less dangerous for being unintentional.

It lies in complete misapprehension of the meaning or intention of a film, or of a scene, character, or speech in it.

It seems almost impossible to produce a film that is equally suitable for the consumption of sophisticated and

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unsophisticated peoples. Here again the solution lies in specialisation—the production of special films for the enormous masses of illiterate and unperspicacious filmgoers and potential filmgoers of India, of Africa, of China.

Anglo-Indians complain bitterly of the cheapening of white women by the exhibition to natives of films representing them to be vicious, immoral, or even venial; the obvious solution in this case is a rigid censorship, such as I should like to see imposed in this country with regard to children; if the unsuitable films were banned, suitable films would soon be provided; supply always follows demand.

And what of us, the Middlebrows all the world over—the engaged lovers, the married lovers, the ditto with kids, the whole vast mass of us, eight millions strong, who go to the pictures week after week, hopefully seeking the good grain of Cinema and meekly accepting the husks of hokum?

To those of us who care to agitate for true grain, it is worth an occasional half-brick, an occasional: “Yah! Highbrow!” to be able to serve that enormous, goodly, orderly company of our questing fellow-men.

## CHAPTER VI

### "LOUD LAUGHTER"—AND WHY

SOME years ago an inquisitive American publicist made an exhaustive research into the Things That Make People Laugh.

The result was a depressing disclosure of human stupidity and unkindness. Highest in the list were such jokes as: "Men sitting on red-hot stoves", "fat men being hit in stomach", "men slipping on banana-skins", "wives nagging", "men insulting their mothers-in-law", and so on. No "Anatomy of Melancholy" could be more melancholy than this revelation of the grisly Anatomy of Mirth.

But is it true that

"Man's inhumanity to man  
Makes countless thousands"

laugh, or is it merely the effect of propinquity and tradition?

I have a strong theory about it, born of special knowledge.

It is my lot often to see comic films in the studio projection-room, and occasionally a few odd members of the general public creep in—visiting friends and relations of the directors', and so on. This is usually against the rules, but studio rules are notoriously fragile.



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It is perhaps significant to record that I have hardly ever, on such an occasion, heard laughter; there are probably polite smiles on the visitors' faces when the lights are turned up, but that is all.

Yet that same comic film will evoke gales of laughter when shown in an ordinary cinema; even at the trade-show, where audiences are supposed to be "hard-boiled", it will probably exact its toll of cackles. Why?

My theory is that tradition obliges us to it, just as tradition insists upon our enjoying a party or dreading a visit to the dentist's. It has been the custom for hundreds of years to laugh when a man falls down. This is a relic of a less humanitarian age, when malformed jesters were kept as the butt of the household, and has been carefully preserved and sustained by clowns and comedians, editors and comic artists, for, as I pointed out in an earlier chapter, it is easier and more immediately profitable to keep on giving people what they think they still want than to offer them something you know they will like better.

But nowadays we do not jeer at the man who is down; it is no longer the thing to do. I could slip on a banana-skin and do a comic back-fall on London Bridge in the lunch-hour, and not half-a-dozen people would laugh. I might be trampled to death by the people running to help me up, but I should not be humiliated to make a London holiday. Our attitude of mind towards such matters has changed. We have become, as a nation, kind.

Only in the music-hall and the cinema does the ancient tradition linger on. There, we expect to see suffering made a butt, and so we go prepared to laugh at it.

It is then that propinquity comes to the aid of tradition. If we are not, for a moment, quite sure whether the

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misfortunes we are witnessing are really funny enough to laugh at or funny at all, we need only listen to our neighbour. If he laughs, it's all right for us to laugh; if neither of us does, someone else will, and there you have the thing launched, for one good laugh starts the rest off.

I remember once when I was interested in a theatrical production, we had rather sparse audiences and a vilely cold theatre, so that it was difficult to "get the house warmed up" to a receptive condition.

By great good luck, however, we discovered that a member of the theatre staff had a most stentorian laugh, and we hit upon the device of sending him in to sit at the back of the audience at the beginning of every performance, to laugh at the jokes.

It worked like magic; the audience, once started, laughed heartily at every line, and our decoy could then come out and get on with his work.

One fallacy of exhibitors is to base their estimate of their audiences' enjoyment of film-comedy upon the laughter it evokes.

There is, I am convinced, an enormous public for films of humour, as opposed to films of broad farce. But one does not, as a rule, laugh uproariously at humour. Some of the best jokes ever made go into "Punch", but "Punch" calls for quiet enjoyment and happy chuckles rather than rib-aching laughter.

The audience watching a film containing witty lines, unexpected sallies, absurd situations and amusing characterisation, sits and enjoys it, and goes away thinking it over and continuing to savour the humour long afterward; next week, the same audience may shout with laughter at a slapstick farce, and come out wondering what it was laughing at. How is the exhibitor to decide

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which film is the most successful? By the noise. Unless he trust his own judgment, there is no other test.

There is another factor favouring farce, and that is the element of speed.

Farce, like drama, has always, on the stage, been rapid. Comedy has a more leisurely development; it appeals more to the intelligence than to the senses, and consequently we are allowed a little longer to savour it.

When films were first launched as a commercial proposition, farce and cowboy-drama were recognised as the best media for the presentation of motion to a not-too-exacting public, so on these two bases the structure of film-production was built.

With the coming of talkies, the whole action was slowed down to comedy pace, and farce suffered a temporary lapse; but now that the film is once again growing foot-loose and cinematic, producers are deserting comedy for farce as a suitable vehicle for swift action.

This phenomenon is based on a misapprehension—that screen comedy, even drawing-room comedy, is necessarily slow.

In the theatre we are accustomed to sitting and watching one set for a whole act, possibly for a whole evening. In the cinema we are not, and we rebel against it. The borrowing from the theatre of long scenes in which people sit about and converse has done its best to kill comedy on the screen; and the tragic thing about it is that it was quite unnecessary—to comedy.

Comedy on the stage is leisurely and of slow development because it relies chiefly on dialogue; but dialogue, on the stage, is action—the kind of action to which theatregoers have always been accustomed. The film can

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provide a totally different kind of action—the action inherent in quick change of scene.

In other words, the flash of repartee on the stage can be matched by the flash of ever-changing scenes on the film—not necessarily the flash of people falling over their own feet. The characters can behave normally, while the camera, in changing rapidly from character to character, from angle to angle, from scene to scene, can supply an illusion of that speed which we demand in our film-entertainment.

For convenience, let us again instance that first-rate British comedy, Alexander Korda's *Service for Ladies*. The development of the plot is leisurely, in the tradition of pure comedy; but the most exacting filmgoer cannot complain that the film is slow, for the eye is never allowed to rest for more than a minute on any scene, and the interest is consequently maintained at high pitch throughout; and the same can be said of a subsequent film by this director, *Wedding Rehearsal*.

By all means let us have farce for children, for the thousands of adults who prefer it, and for the thousands more who like it in due season; and if pure comedy can be blended with farce in the manner of Charlie Chaplin, so much the wider its appeal. But do not starve us of pure comedy because we are not heard laughing uproariously at it.

When screen-comedy is produced skilfully, intelligently, and sympathetically, it will not only deserve our patronage, but receive it. At present it is almost entirely reserved for the purpose of "relieving" dramatic films. Donald Calthrop and Gordon Harker are two brilliant exponents of English comedy at its best; we catch glimpses of them in films otherwise sombre, and long for

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more. But when Harker was "featured" in a film, what was he given to play? Essentially low comedy, which bordered on the slapstick.

The solution lies, again, in cinema specialisation. If a cinema were to undertake to supply us with true comedy, as distinct from farce—and could obtain enough films of this type to keep it going—I warrant it would be as well patronised as any.

## CHAPTER VII

### ON HORNING-IN

LIKE the coffee-stall proprietor who always kept on his shelf a set of mugs decorated with crowns in case of a visit by the Royal Family, I believe in being prepared for emergencies.

So, lest this book fall into the hands of any of the hundreds of people who write asking me how to get into the film-studios, or of the millions who want to get in but mercifully haven't thought of writing to me about it, here is a chapter on the subject.

The Americans have a picturesque expression, more or less equivalent to "gate-crashing"—"horning-in". Let us assume you wish to horn-in to the film-territory. How do you go about it?

Tactfully refraining from the obvious warning, I will merely indicate the various avenues of approach.

It is ten to one that you want to be a film-star; well, setting aside for the moment my prediction that there will shortly be "no sich animal" (since it is fair to assume that you have read as far as this), I charge you to obtain a part in a stage-play; it is not within the province of this book to discuss how such parts are obtained.

When your stage-experience has furnished you with skill and confidence, you may be noticed by a film-director who is on the prowl for talent, and offered a part in his film. You will then be so excited that you will

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forget to send me a picture-postcard thanking me for the advice.

If you merely want to get into the crowd, after what I have told you about its conditions and prospects, I give you up. Seek out an agent where he may be found, and persuade him to register you for crowdwork; but omit the picture-postcard. I am always pleased to hear of success, but never of anyone joining the crowd. It is a sorry business.

If you are a carpenter, joiner, plumber, electrician, painter, plasterer, or experienced scene-shifter desirous of working at your trade in the film-studios, write to the studio-manager, enclosing copies of your references and a stamp for reply, exactly as you would to any other employer of labour. If you cannot find the addresses of the studios in the telephone-directory, you are not likely to obtain employment anyway.

If you hanker to write scenarios, first be quite sure whether it is scenarios or film-stories you wish to write; writing the latter in this country is usually a free-lance job, with very little to eat. Write to the scenario-editor, asking whether he is reading original stories, *and enclosing stamp for reply*. If he is, send him your story, in narrative form and in five hundred words at most; and *not* divided into acts, scenes, or episodes. Remember it is not a scenario. The story-reader skims through dozens of MSS. a day—and you cannot skim through a scenario as easily as you can a narrative; so any attempt at scenario form would probably be sent back unread.

Scenario-writing is a highly-technical business which usually takes months or even years to learn—and will, I hope, eventually become a very fine art, and half the “whole works” of film-production. You can write to the

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general manager inquiring whether there is a vacancy for a learner, but I am afraid you haven't a hope. (*Vide* my remarks on Nephews, page 199.) The same applies to enthusiastic amateur photographers who wish to become cameramen.

Perhaps you are a dress-designer. It would be a poor studio that had none already, and few companies need more than one; however, write to the general manager, stating your qualifications; your letter *may* arrive on the day a vacancy occurs. I have known it happen. But do not imagine that you are an expert *film* dress-designer unless you have a grasp of photographic values in colour and form.

You probably fancy yourself as a film journalist; this is a pleasant occupation, since it enables you to meet the stars, who like publicity; and you can then do a little basking in reflected glory.

It is comparatively easy, too. If you have ever sold an article on knitted woolly jumpers to, for instance, *Weldon's Ladies' Journal*, you are a journalist, and can obtain permission to interview Miss Totty Tiptoes about her frocks at Elstree—representing yourself, by inference, as being commissioned by a journal to do it (unfortunately this trick is played every week, and the studios, as well as the editors concerned, are growing watchful); you then sell your article to a paper, and behold! you are a film journalist.

Of course, next time you visit the studio you may be rigidly "barred", for in the meantime the Publicity Department will have investigated your false credentials; but a journalist's life is a short and a gay one anyway.

A little while ago I was approached by a retired colonial judge, who suggested that he might be of use in



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advising on judicial procedure in trial scenes, and might even consent (mark the word!) to play the part of a judge, provided his actual association with the Bench were not publicised.

Judges are notoriously out of touch with the details of modern life, and the mechanism of film-production is esoteric; nevertheless, one would expect a highly-educated person who contemplated making money out of an industry to spy out the land in advance.

The learned judge based his tentative offer on four false premises. Firstly, that a producer would depend for his London court procedure on the authority of an expert in Colonial procedure; for a few guineas he could hire the advisory services of an ex-usher or solicitor's clerk of almost any court he wished to reproduce. Secondly, that it is desirable to reproduce procedure *exactly*; that, as I have tried to show, would be undramatic; and although we do not put our film-barristers in full-bottomed wigs of cottonwool as I saw them recently in an important American film, we limit our observance of detail to the confines of dramatic expedience. Thirdly, that it is considered advisable to have a real judge on the Bench in a film; the ideal at present is to have an expert actor who resembles as nearly as possible the popular conception of a judge—such as Arthur Wontner; the ideal in the future will be an intelligent and obedient man who resembles exactly the popular conception. (I would have cast my applicant as Charles Cheeryble if I could have found a Ned to match.) Fourthly, that there would be any reason *other* than the publicity value for having a judge played by a judge.

One of the worst handicaps of the film-industry at present is its enormous burden of inexperts. The studio

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executives who are not themselves inexpert realise this evil, but for various reasons are unable to remedy it; but they can, and will, prevent a further influx of dead-heads who have neither the personality nor the influence to force their way in, despite all opposition.

If you feel inspired to enter the borders of Filmland, and become a citizen of that strange country—if your decision gives you no rest by day or night, and your whole life is set upon your purpose, go to it; but you can only be so minded if you feel the making of films to be worthy of your best effort; and if you feel it to be so worthy, you will realise that only your best effort will suffice.

My advice to you then is to join an amateur cine society or club—of which there are over a hundred and fifty scattered throughout Britain—and to study at first hand the principles and potentialities of this “art served by science” to which you propose to devote your life; to devour the literature of the subject; to see as many films as you can, learning from the bad ones as well as the good, and employing the root principles (so far as you know them) as your standard of criticism; above all, to approach the subject as Rudyard Kipling declares the science of warfare should be approached:

“As it were almost cricket, not to be mastered in haste,  
But after trial and labour, by temperance, living  
chaste.

As it were almost cricket—as it were even your play,  
Weighed and pondered and worshipped, and practised  
day by day.”

“Living chaste” perhaps does not conform to the

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popular conception of Film-land—but it represents Film-land as it will be when the long-protracted days of pioneer mess and muddle have passed; and many pilgrims, led by its glamorous exterior to expect otherwise, will be grievously disappointed.

## CHAPTER VIII

### UNDISCOVERED ENDS

To what purpose is Film-land fermenting? Is the change merely chemical?

Is all this intense activity, this strenuous human endeavour, shaping towards any end more worthy than the enrichment of a few hundred producers, the sustenance of a few thousand exhibitors, the employment of a few hundred thousand workers, and the amusement of a few million pleasure-seekers?

I believe it is.

I have touched lightly in these chapters on the educational and cultural aspect of films, their potentialities for mental and moral development. We self-conscious Britons are apt to be a little nervous of anything approaching Uplift. That is for Sunday, and the parsons, and a few Societies of Well-meaning but Totally Misguided Cranks. The denizens of those United States, we are vaguely aware, go in for it, openly and on a week-day . . . but they also have Prohibition, lynching, kidnapping, street battles, and the Chicago stock-yards. We don't go to such extremes. There is something in our national temper that rebels against our looking utterly ridiculous.

Yet I see signs. Even in the wholly commercial, censor-ridden, hokum-filled, trite and twittering films that occupy our screens, I see signs that this misshapen child

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that was born in a peep-show over half a century ago, that has grown into a half-witted and hump-backed jester, gibbering and grimacing for our idle amusement, will yet grow to full manhood; will straighten his back and stand erect, and do a man's work in the world; will even have something to tell us that may make us glad.

I believe I know what you are thinking. Propaganda . . . sermonising . . . uplift. . . .

Well, what about this propaganda? Haul the word out into the light of day, and let's have a look at it.

As I understand it, it simply signifies a means of propagation, and to propagate is to disseminate, to diffuse, a belief or a practice.

We are too apt to let a prejudice rob us of our best words. Merely because the Russians use Propaganda for a purpose which seems to us, on account of its motives and possible results, sinister, we have allowed this useful and worthy word to slip into our verbal dustbin, along with the discarded slang of yesterday and the too-acrid expressions of to-day. It is reject. It lies there huddled together with "sweat" and "slut" and "stink" and "muck", its Latin sensitivity bruised by their jolly Anglo-Saxon vulgarity.

I will have Propaganda. I will hale it out and clean it carefully and set it in the honest sunshine to purify and (if it has not forgotten the way during its stay in Russia) fructify.

It can serve us well, it and Cinema in partnership. It can bring new blood into our veins as a Nation, new meaning into our life as a Race.

What can we, self-contained and stolid Britons, not given to proselytism, possibly wish to propagate?

A few chapters back I said we should look behind us,

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at History, for our film material; is there nothing there besides the means of passing a wet evening without boredom? Is there nothing of any value to be gleaned from those rich galleries of the Past?

I think we have never, in all our history either as a nation or as a race, stood in such dire need of direction as we do to-day; we look helplessly this way and that for a leader; not necessarily a political leader, or a religious leader, but someone who can give a fellow a timely hint as to what he ought to do in his ordinary daily grind, in these days when things seems to get a bit too much for him.

That is my reason for dragging Propaganda from the dustbin; and what I want to have propagated is something of that Faith, something of that Hope, something of that Charity which has kept us, as a nation, intact while kings of seven alien peoples have reigned in our land; which has kept the Jews as a race intact through all the dull darkness of the weary years; which brings us through war, pestilence, famine, earthquake, drought, misgovernment, and (I am not joking: this book is written in earnest) wet August Bank Holidays, with courage in our hearts and a kindly word on our lips.

I want Propaganda to turn to the turbulent middle shelves, and take therefrom the story of Cromwell and his Ironsides, of Charles and his Cavaliers, and show us the brave gaiety serving God and the dour honesty serving God—and the bright spark of Truth that they both missed in the scuffle when rapier clashed on broadsword.

I want Propaganda to show us the pomp and circumstance of kings and the wrath and tyranny of barons, and how the brave, silly, simple folk of our forests and

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fens and downlands dodged them both and went about their business as calmly and as decently as if they already had Wimbledon and wireless, Cup-ties and cinemas.

I want Propaganda to show us why we are what we are; why we have what we have; why we lack what we lack. And I want Propaganda to do this with the aid of its strongest ally, Cinema.

But that will be preaching, you think? That will be turning our screen into a pulpit, our Saturday night into Sunday morning, our fun into gloom and boredom?

It needn't be. Russian film propaganda is mainly crude, because it is directed at people of crude mind, of low intelligence; but it is nevertheless entertaining. I defy you to see a film by Pudovkin or Kuleshov or Eisenstein and not be interested, however violently you may disagree with its politics. Its moral is there, obvious, stressed, inescapable . . . but *interesting*.

Our rulers do not regard Russian propaganda as dull political stodge; despite its crudity, they are careful to ban it from our cinemas, lest it convert us. But if they could only see that the weapon they fear has its handle turned towards them, to grasp and wield!

If the films that are made for the persuasion of the ignorant *moujik* are so entertaining, how much more so may be those intended for us, who can be safely trusted to read between the lines? We need not have our lesson spelled out to us, slowly and deliberately, or shouted into our thick skulls. If the whole truth be set before us, trust us to weigh it and measure it and sift it carefully, the gold from the dross, and turn it to good account.

But we must have the whole truth, as it has been set forth of Prohibition in the American film *The Wet*

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*Parade.* There must be, as in that good film, no glorification of Humanity to flatter us, no forced happy ending to soothe us, no Hokum to drug us into insensibility. There is a happy ending to every human story—but it is reached through blood and fire, not through artificial short cuts.

The propaganda must be human, not political or religious. We must see ourselves as we have been and are, so that we may at least rough-hew our ends decently for Divinity to shape.

I can see the shrewd business-man of Filmland pursing his lips and shaking his head over this, and saying: "Yes, that's all very well—but there's no money in it."

Isn't there? I claim that there *is*—money for everyone, and ease, and comfort, and security, and much beside that money cannot buy. It would pay a dividend unimagined in Wardour Street.

Since the Church will none of it, and Commerce will none of it, it may be some wealthy humanitarian will undertake the task of welding Cinema and Propaganda—and, knowing little of Filmland, will fall among thieves.

Cinema may encounter some rude shocks in the course of the next few years. Radio may buffet it, television may slip a knife in its ribs, the revival in the Theatre, accompanying the deep and wide religious revival that is to come, may shoulder it out of the proud place it holds at the moment; but I look forward to a time when this great, sprawling, lumpish creature with the body of a man and the mind of a child shall develop into a Power of the first—because the truly greatest—magnitude.

It will come.























